

The leadership shadow: How to recognise and avoid derailment, hubris and overdrive

Leadership

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Abstract

In his influential book *Capital in the 21st Century* Thomas Piketty (2014) shows that the present rate of return on capital being higher than economic growth is leading to increasing wealth and income inequality, which ultimately stifles our growth and prosperity. For some time I have noticed a similar pattern applying to top leadership in corporates, where current growth rates of managerial discretion and remuneration topple increases in leadership effectiveness, which is leading to organisational inequalities that are stifling our economy's development, agility and growth.

In this article I look at the immense pressures on the function of leadership, on leaders and their followers, from an organisational, ontological and personal perspective. I try to demonstrate that there are three areas of conflict: the projections and expectations put upon leaders, the confusion of misleading definitions of leadership, and an internal conflict which always emerges when taking up a leadership role. I describe and explore the emergence of a splitting phenomenon called the leadership shadow which is a common consequence of these pressures, and suggest a few local solutions to this great societal leadership predicament.

Keywords

Leadership, Leadership under scrutiny, Leadership definitions, Leadership objectives, Leadership effectiveness, Power, Identity, Managerial discretion, The leadership shadow, Derailment

The challenges of leaders today

Never before has a solid understanding of leadership been more needed and more elusive at the same time. The quality of the leadership in Western institutions has once more come under serious scrutiny. After the disillusioning behaviour and practices of democratically elected top political leaders throughout the nineties; after the major catastrophes in the

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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. Yet at the same time leadership scholars realise with more clarity than ever before that we do not well understand formal and informal leadership processes, how they work, when they are effective, or even... what they are for.

As our understanding of the leadership process is still falling short of the level needed to make meaningful improvements to it, the conditions and context of leadership are developing at high speed. Senior executives who are actively engaged in managing and leading an organisation today experience the 21st-century world as highly unpredictable and in such rapid flux that it does not seem to be a place for equivocating wimps. They are expected to be decisive and in control. The problems they face are presented in such a way that they seem to require deliberate, quick and intelligent action. Consequently executives are being trained and strongly encouraged to be 'relentless' and to 'prevail' in the face of challenge and adversity. The situations they face and schedules that are imposed on them seem to require physical and psychological resilience, as they navigate the complex and contradictory challenges as well as the massive workloads (Harding, 2014).

But what has created the tremendous demands that leaders face today? Why are many leaders feeling so severely stretched? What is it about the context within which they work that has created the experiences they face? What makes it so important first to adapt to pressures and then to understand what is going on more fundamentally?

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 even a few decades ago. 'High performance' now requires more than ever that executives have to be able to solve problems quickly, be skilful and succinct in written and verbal communication, and have a specialist expertise in at least some of the key functions of the organisation that they are overlooking. However, today high performance also means that they have to be seen to do this "twenty four seven", with people they have never met, taking greater accountability for actions and outcomes than ever before, and navigating new and different risks and hazards using a multiplicity of technologies to stay connected, in touch and available. In other words, it is not just 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 whilst becoming more transparent; they have become more interconnected whilst becoming more technology driven; and they have become more democratic whilst becoming more accountable. It is clearly time for a different kind of business leader, not necessarily a charismatic or transformational leader (Tourish, 2014), but a leader who can remain connected, relational and open to scrutiny from all directions. See also Brown (2014) who comes to similar conclusions in the domain of political leadership.

Anthony Kasozi and I have written the book *The Leadership Shadow* to address the common experience that in these very challenging times, and in the midst of a hectic career and powerful projections cum expectations, managers and leaders may go into *over-drive*. For us as coaches and consultants it has become important to challenge leaders who are both hard drivers of the business and very driven themselves, about what has been called their "high degree of domination, exploitation and aggressive control over people's lives and the reduction of employees as 'working selves' to disposable pieces of furniture" (Harding,

2014: 409). In this situation, the positive manifestations of the leader's relentless focus become overcooked and adopt unhelpful and ultimately unproductive patterns of reticence, stubbornness, persuasion 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 and serially unhelpful, obstinate, resentful, inarticulate, or intense. They become a caricature of themselves. This experience of 'overdrive' 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 loss of physiological and psychological resilience. Ultimately, overshooting may lead to a negative spiral that can cause physical 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, whilst arguably remaining one of the most obscure. This is possibly because leadership (of any kind, including a mother's full-time care of a baby or a citizen's decision to vote) 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 inside organisations on a daily basis.

Despite the many thousands of books and articles about leadership (e.g. according to Morris et al., 2005, there were almost four hundred thousand articles and books on leadership at that time and this number keeps growing fast) it is extremely difficult to find a definition that is rigorous and able to capture the essence of leadership.

Rost's (1991) analysis of a vast array of leadership studies from the early 1900s onwards has lost nothing of its accuracy and relevance. 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 80s leadership studies were mostly limited to 'school leadership', 'military leadership', 'business leadership', etcetera, without recognising an overarching profession or discipline. Rost concludes that to his 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 opinions 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 (1991) 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 core ways of describing leadership, whether explicitly or implicitly:

- (1) Leadership = *influencing* others to willingly do what you want them to, i.e. leading means gaining or using power over others;
- (2) Leadership = a certain form of *excellence*, i.e. 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*, i.e. everybody is suitable to be a leader, or indeed nobody.

The third definition is particularly problematic. It unintentionally leads to the assumption of formal leadership of a team or organisation as being inevitably a scarce resource, something we all need to compete for that therefore also deserves a high reward. 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 ‘managerial 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 failing in the eyes of their direct reports (Hogan, 2007). Typical management behaviours associated with defining leadership as ‘taking up the leadership role’ are

- *Claiming the space*, by e.g. 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 initial or helpful contributions within 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* (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012), including marketing self, brushing up positive characteristics and masking negative traits;
- *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’.

Harding (2014) has explored the subjective journey of such leadership in much more depth and comes to the conclusion that ‘becoming a leader requires that the individual attach themselves to an identity that causes them to suffer’ (p. 401), ‘something that is less than, or beyond, the human: he is subjected and subjectified as if he were a machine or a body without a brain’ (p. 402); ‘the leader has to prove that he is not guilty of failing to fulfil the normative ideal of ‘the leader’, and to do this he has to work ever harder at fulfilling his leadership role’ (p. 408).

Apart from these visible consequences of this particular conception of leadership, there are likely to be internal and invisible consequences as well. Firstly, 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 internal picture or 'identity', 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' attributes. Petriglieri and Stein (2012) 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 leaders may contribute to 'ongoing conflict and a toxic culture' in organisations.

A new-found definition of leadership

When Anthony and I 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 as *a process that is devoted to enhancing an organisation's effectiveness*. We discovered through Rost (1991) that the American sociologist Campbell had already suggested a similar definition in 1956. This definition recognises that it is the team that needs to be competitive, not the leader. Leadership interventions have a modest aim, namely for the team or organisation 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, the terms 'organisation' and 'enhancing' can be understood in a vast variety of ways. For us, leadership stretches all the way from the ordinary, predictable and conservative '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.

The most important aspect of effectiveness in leadership is now easy to guess. The output of an organisation is somehow the 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. It is in our view 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. In other words, it is essential for all stakeholders in leadership to strive towards a process of leadership that includes and encourages uncertainty, ambiguity, multiplicity of perspectives and dissent (Tourish, 2014).

Some other important consequences flowing from this simple definition of leadership:

1. Leadership is the same as management and leadership as distinct from the formal 'role' of a leader is also the same as followership including proactive dissent (Tourish, 2014); these and other organisational functions such as entrepreneurship, ownership, quality control, etcetera, are only distinct ways of contributing to a very wide and complex leadership process, not in any way polar opposites to leadership (Collinson, 2014).
 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, i.e. it is a meaning-making activity.
 5. Leadership is in essence distributed not concentrated and transactional not transformational; moreover leadership is more relational than it is located inside individuals.
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Even when approached with a helpful definition and with sound understanding leadership comes with inevitable anxieties, doubts and projections. Leaders often feel the tension of taking responsibility, as well as the uncertainty and unpredictability of outcome. They feel self-doubt or instead overconfidence. They will succumb to the vicious cycle of 'impotence' versus 'omnipotence' that many leaders feel on a daily basis. To step into leadership and serve the team requires one to 'step up to the plate', to face up to and deal with these and other similar anxieties. Even then, as participants in the leadership process try to face their demons and anxieties they can be certain that their vulnerabilities and pathologies will re-emerge whenever they have the audacity to 'lead', i.e. to express themselves on the performance and effectiveness of their own organisation.

Leaders' unique drivers and competences are their key assets that drive the creative dynamic of their leadership practice. These highly personal talents can settle into patterns. Patterns can be productive and problematic, and mostly 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.

My experience of the reality of working in complex organisations made up of diverse human beings in a dynamic external environment suggests that one's 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, whilst also living the challenges, changing the patterns, inviting others' contributions, and thus embracing uncertainty and realising possibility.

The shadow side of leadership

To be charged with a leadership position is an honour and distinction. It elevates one into a position of responsibility over others and puts one 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 Anthony and I 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. From a deep exploration of one leader's subjectivity, Harding (2014) concludes that 'becoming a leader requires repudiating everything that is other to the requirement of hard work', e.g. 'one's secret, guilty desires, which are then projected into followers' (p. 407), which is in itself an 'ungrievable loss which must be defended against' (p. 408).

Generally it is very tempting to identify with our 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 whilst one continues to 'grow' one's leadership presence and 'mature' in the leadership role.

Such a stepping up and stepping into roles works very well until as a leader one encounters criticism or questioning of one's leadership contributions, thus revealing that the leader has something important to learn relating to his or her very personal meaning-making abilities.

The moment a leader needs to learn or change something is the moment he or she needs to revert to his or her 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 they have now ignored for some time. At that point there is a conflict, between one's pride and one's passion, between one's best intentions and one's innermost shame, and between one's 'up' and one's 'down'. The side of us that is 'up' wants to stay up, win more leadership presence and influence, whilst 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* (De Haan and Kasozi, 2014) we identified 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, based on medical categories as expressed in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (*DSM-5*) and *The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems Tenth Revision (ICD-10)* manuals.

These provide an overview of 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 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 pattern, 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: the leader believes the rules are made to be broken and finds it hard to be held accountable for her/his actions.
- *The playful encouragers*, whose influence is felt mainly indirectly. In this leadership pattern full responsibility for taking action may be difficult, as responsibility may be relegated to the 'shadow'. *Passive-aggressive* patterns linked with the playful encourager: what one says is not what one really believes and so leaders find it hard to take responsibility for their views and actions.
- *Glowing Gatsbies*, who influence from the front and bask in their successes. In this leadership pattern it may be easier to criticise others but harder to look at oneself in a similar way, as the leader's humility may have been relegated to the 'shadow'. *Narcissistic* patterns linked with the glowing Gatsby: the leader believes that he or she is right, whilst 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 pattern it may be hard to keep the organisation's issues and people into focus, as the leader's 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: leaders disengaged and disconnected from the everyday running of the business.

The leadership shadow is emerging as a serious risk factor for top leaders

Leadership positions afford power in the form of the *managerial 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 up ever more problematic tantrums.

Following the definition of a leader as ‘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 ‘high education’ are sought, over and above the motivation and the presentation of the candidates. However, Hogan (2007) also notes that even the best of such procedures look for positive assets rather than excluding negatives. Serious derailment criteria such as personality disturbances are completely hidden from ordinary recruitment practice. This includes traditional assessment centres (Hogan and Hogan, 2001).

There is accumulating evidence in the literature that overdrive patterns are much more common in higher levels of leadership. On reviewing recent research Kaiser et al. (in press) conclude that about a quarter of thousands of *middle* managers (25%) had at least one shadow-side trait sufficiently elevated to be considered a performance risk, whilst across three samples including 378 *senior* executives a much higher percentage (98%) had at least one risk factor. 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.

As argued above, countless leaders 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*, i.e. the leadership shadow, can result in a toxic organisation and to very costly and bruising adjustments. Appreciating the benefits of certain attributes, whilst 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 personal leadership derailment. Executives must balance their leadership, and coaches, L&D and HR professionals 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 your own shadow side.
- Be as relational as possible by nurturing relationships: leading not in the abstract and not just indirectly, but here and now with other leaders and stakeholders.
- Engage in active and honest (self-) reflection.

Author's note

The Leadership Shadow – How to Recognise and Avoid Derailment, Hubris and Overdrive by Erik de Haan and Anthony Kasozi. Published by Kogan Page in August 2014, price £24.99.

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