

## The leadership debate with Henry Mintzberg: Community-ship is the answer

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Published: October 23 2006 12:04 | Last updated: October 23 2006 12:04

We have this obsession with “leadership”. Its intention may be to empower people, but its effect is often to disempower them. By focusing on the single person, even in the context of others, leadership becomes part of the syndrome of individuality that is sweeping the world and undermining organisations in particular and communities in general.

Of course leadership matters. And of course leadership can make a difference. But how often does this get magnified into a tautology: show the press a successful organisation and it will show you a great leader. So much easier than trying to find out what really happened. “In four years [Lou] Gerstner has added more than \$40bn to IBM’s share value”, proclaimed Fortune magazine in 1997. All by himself!

Where leadership does matter, as it probably did in the case of Mr Gerstner, then IBM’s chief executive, what kind of leadership is that? Is it the heroic leadership so commonly portrayed in the press – the great one who rides in on the white horse to save the day, changing anything at will, even if he or she arrived only yesterday, with barely any knowledge of the organisation, its history, or its culture? That has mostly proved to be a formula for disaster.

According to one report, IBM got into e-business because a programmer with an idea conveyed it to a staff manager with more insight than budget, and he stitched together a team that drove the change. And what role did Mr Gerstner play? When he eventually heard about the initiative, he encouraged it. That’s all. Instead of setting direction, he supported the direction setting of others. He provided less leadership. But appropriate leadership. We might say just enough leadership! What could be simpler, more natural, than that?

For starters, let us recognize that separating leadership from management is part of the problem.

Does anyone want to work for a manager who lacks the qualities of leadership? That can be pretty discouraging. Well, how about a leader who doesn’t practice management? That can be pretty alienating: he or she is unlikely to know what is going on. (These days, we distinguish leaders from managers. Half a century ago, Peter Drucker distinguished managers from administrators – with exactly the same idea in mind! We keep upping the ante; soon we will be distinguishing gods from heroes.) The world has been taken over by a new aristocracy – of leadership disconnected from what leadership is supposed to be about. Maybe it is time for some plain ordinary leader/managers.

We hear a great deal about micro managing these days – managers who meddle in the work of those who report to them. Sure it can be a problem. But more serious now is macro managing – managers who sit on “top,” pronouncing their great visions, grand strategies, and abstract performance standards while everyone else is supposed to scurry around “implementing”. I call this “management by deeming.” It is leadership apart.

We have too much of this leadership apart – the hyped-up, individually focused, context-free leadership so popular in the classroom as well as the press. Courses and MBA programmes that claim to create leaders all too often promote hubris instead. No leader has ever been created in a classroom.

Leadership grows in context, where it gains its most important characteristic: legitimacy. Enough of all these young, barely experienced people running around calling themselves “leaders”, worse still “young leaders” (who can really discern that?), just because they attended some course, or because some institution spilled the holy water of “leadership” on these people they hardly knew.

Mostly these days, we get illegitimate leadership, selected by outsiders and imposed on insiders. A board of mainly external directors, or a senior management, gets charmed by a candidate whose internal practice of management they have never experienced. How remarkable that those people who know the candidates best, having been led, or at least managed, by them, are so rarely consulted on these choices.

True leadership is earned, internally – in the unit, or the organisation, or the community, even the nation, that not only accepts the guidance of some person, but sought it out in the first place, and has subsequently sustained it with enthusiasm. How many of today’s companies and countries can claim to be headed by people with that kind of legitimacy? How many current heads of state have been “drafted” by overwhelming popular will, as was, say, Nelson Mandela in South Africa?

But even this overstates the case for leadership. People, of course, seek leaders, but often they fool themselves, by mixing up leaders with leadership. There is, in other words, a need for more of what has been called “distributed leadership,” meaning that the role is fluid, shared by various people in a group according to their capabilities as conditions change. Is that not how the Linux Operating System and Wikipedia work?

But calling even this “leadership” slights it, because its effectiveness lies not in any individual so much as in the collective social process – essentially in community.

Every time we use the word leadership, therefore, we have to bear in mind that it isolates an individual while treating everyone else as a follower. Is this the kind of world we want: overwhelmingly one of followers? Will that make our institutions and our societies better places?

Our obsession with leadership, of any kind, causes us to build organisations that are utterly dependent on individual initiative. We do not allow them to function as communities. So when they fail, we blame the leader, and seek a better one. Like drug addicts, each time we need a bigger hit.

Consider that ubiquitous organisation chart, with its silly boxes of “top”, and “middle”, and bottom managers. How come we never say “bottom managers”? This is no more than a distorted metaphor. It tells us that we are fixated on who has authority over what and whom. The painting may not be the pipe, but to most of us, the chart has become the organisation.

Isn't it time to think of our organisations as communities of cooperation, and in so doing put leadership in its place: not gone, but alongside other important social processes.

What should be gone is this magic bullet of the individual as the solution to the world's problems. We are the solution to the world's problems, you and me, all of us, working in concert. This obsession with leadership is the cause of many of the world's problems.

And with this, let us get rid of the cult of leadership, striking at least one blow at our increasing obsession with individuality. Not to create a new cult around distributed leadership, but to recognize that the very use of the word leadership tilts thinking toward the individual and away from the community. We don't only need better leadership, we also need less leadership.

How about if we challenge every single speech, programme, article, and book using the word “leadership” that does not give equal attention to “communityship” in one form or another? This could have profound implications, not only for the effectiveness of our organisations, but also for the democracy of our societies.

\*Waking Up IBM by Gary Hamel, Harvard Business Review, July-August, 2000

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