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TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF LEADERSHIP
Tony Manning

Leadership, we all know, is vital in any society. It makes things happen. It inspires and guides human performance. It makes organizations – in both the private and public sectors – effective. We feel confident in the charge of "strong" leaders, and skittish when there's a vacuum. Yet, leadership is a mysterious matter. For all that's written and said about it, we know precious little. Much of what we are told is useless.

What, exactly, defines a leader's work? Are leaders born or made? Does leadership require specific traits, skills, or behaviours? How can we identify tomorrow's leaders? What's the best way to develop them? What growth path should aspirant leaders seek? How must leaders act, to be deemed successful?

These questions are asked every day. "Experts" from various fields purport to have the answers. Mostly, they add to the confusion.

In a survey of business schools in the *Sunday Times Business Times*, we are told, "The MBA has become an essential professional qualification because it inculcates management and leadership ability." But elsewhere the same newspaper carries a lengthy interview with Henry Mintzberg, widely regarded as one of the finest business academics in the world, as part of a "Business Leadership Series." Says Mintzberg: "I think every MBA should have a skull and crossbones stamped on their forehead and underneath should be written: "'Warning: not prepared to manage.'"

Gary Hamel once wrote, "Anyone who claims to be a strategist should be intensely embarrassed by the fact that the strategy industry doesn't have a theory of strategy creation!" The same applies – perhaps even more so – to leadership.

In a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, Warren Bennis, one of the most admired experts in the field, noted: "There are something like 276 definitions of leadership. You can't say that there is a paradigm, any agreed-upon set of factors, that is generally accepted." Adds James O'Toole, another outstanding observer and writer, "The bad news is this: despite the considerable effort that has gone into the study of leadership, what is known with scientific certainty about the subject can be stored on a thimble."

There's no doubting the subject's importance. But there's no doubting either, that much of what we're told about it is nonsense, or at best, plain common sense. What's more, when you search through the literature and cut through the guff, it turns out that there's not very much to say about it after all.

Just as we know good strategies only when we see them, so do we know good leaders only when we see them. This "after the fact" reality is not one that headhunters, educators, or other gurus want to hear. Their livelihood depends on the pretence that there's some clear-cut way to identify future leaders, some known process for developing them, and some set of practices that will make them shine.

Countless attempts have been made over many decades to build a body of knowledge about leadership. Most are based on studies of a handful of individuals. Some focus on just one person. So it's no wonder that only a few offer useful – or at best *interesting* – insights.

But that's about all they offer. To hope for a shift from art to science is pointless.

Despite the efforts that go into recruitment, and the growing sophistication of psychometric and other tools, there is no way to tell if an individual will perform in a new job. The traits that seem to make one man a hero make another a failure. The behaviours that take one person to great heights drive others into the dust. And all too often, the man or woman who does well at one time, in one set of circumstances, becomes a hopeless disappointment later.

Consider, for example, the captains of industry who become "Businessman of the Year" or "Businesswoman of the Year." They win their awards for good reason – not just because they're lucky. Yet lots of them take a dive. One minute, they're worth watching; the next, they're off the list.

Not long ago, charisma was thought be to a vital leadership trait. "Celebrity CEOs" commanded obscene pay packages, graced social columns in glossy media, and published books about themselves. Today, though, fashion has swung towards what *Business Week* called "The good CEO." Charisma is no longer a big deal.

What about vision, then? Isn't that a big deal? Not any more, it seems. "An enthusiasm for good corporate governance has replaced vision as the most desirable characteristic for a new boss," says *The Economist*. (It could be argued that South Africa more than its share of visionaries and bold dreamers; that what's missing is people who can turn dreams into reality!)

Fashions in leadership will come and go. Each swing of the pendulum will see organizations hot-footing it after the latest "new thing" – abandoning what everyone agreed was "best practice" only yesterday.

Running an organization of any size is not easy. Sustaining performance is a major challenge. Few firms grow fast for long. Fewer still are able to produce consistent profits. Only some of this is due to leadership. *External* factors play a large role.

Leaders, to a far greater extent than they might admit, are prisoners of their context. If truth be told, notes Rukesh Khurana, associate professor of organizational behaviour at Harvard Business School, there is a "lack of any conclusive evidence linking leadership to organizational performance." The impact a CEO makes "depends greatly on circumstances."

What is not in dispute, though, is that, on balance, as Jack Welch says, "The company with the best *team* wins." Leadership is not a solo act. Only when there is a critical mass of talent and skill in an organization is there any chance of dealing well with external circumstances.

These are the facts.

Another fact is that South Africa has a desperate shortage of executive talent. A decade ago, it was estimated that there would be a deficit of about 200 000 people in this category by the year 2000. Yet today, the number is thought to be anywhere from 500 000 to 700 000. (Even if these numbers are off the mark, daily media reports of company failures and the inability of public sector to "deliver" should leave us in no doubt that SA has far too few people who know how to get things done.)

This is without doubt the No. 1 crisis facing the country. For without competent people in pivotal positions, other crises – HIV/AIDS, poverty, crime, health, and so on – will never be dealt with. ABSA economists warn that the skills shortage will be a major constraint on economic growth.

CEOs in almost every industry lament the talent they've lost. Search firms say it's taking longer – and getting harder – to find good people.

At the same time, government is intent on putting more of the economy – both ownership and control – in black hands. Ominous threats have been made against organizations that "transform" too slowly. An "empowerment charter" in the oil industry has been followed by one in the mining industry; top financial services executives are working proactively to develop a way forward for their industry; government is driving change in the IT sector. And underlining the pressure for change, the director-general of public service and administration has said, "Government policy is that all sectors must have charters."

By now, few people would argue against the need to rapidly involve blacks in every part of the economy. But nor should there be any argument about the cost of doing it, or about the threat to effectiveness and competitiveness in the short- to medium-term at least.

Almost all change is disruptive and comes with hidden costs. *Accelerated* change raises the odds that valuable skills and "organizational memory" will be lost and morale will be hurt. Restructuring on a major scale is expensive, time-consuming, and disruptive; it usually takes longer than anyone expects, and the first moves trigger ongoing upheavals.

Experience so far has shown that many previously disadvantaged people can have a profoundly positive impact on organizations. They have excellent qualifications and valuable experience (both of which might have been gained overseas), plus intellectual brightness and a refreshing openness to change. And SA is better off for being able to source talent from 40 million people than just from 5 million.

Unfortunately, though, anyone cannot manage just anything they might wish to. As in every other field – sport, the arts, science – some people have what it takes, while others don't. Many who appear to have "the right stuff" turn out to be disappointing.

So here's our dilemma: we face many very serious challenges, yet we have too few leaders – and we know too little about how to produce more. (And even a minor uptick in economic growth will make things much worse.)

As with any strategic dilemma, answers will only come when we challenge the assumptions that define a situation. And the assumptions in this case are:

1. Only a few people have what it takes to be a leader.
2. It takes time to develop leaders.

But what if we decided that *many* people have the potential to be leaders? And what if their potential could actually be revealed quite *fast*? And what if it were easier than we imagine to help them become effective?

Perhaps for too long we have been looking at things in one way. So we repeat ourselves, and that, of course, means we keep getting the same results. But *the only way to get different results is to consider different possibilities.*

Begin with whom we consider for leadership roles. One way or another, most people are quickly eliminated from the race. For all the talk of empowerment, equal opportunities, and "human capital", they're just not given a chance.

Now think about how people are tested. Are they really challenged and stretched? Do they get the information, resources, and support they need to show their worth? In too many cases, the answer is no. Assumptions about them are based not on fact, but on expectations, perceptions, and prejudices.

3

And what about development? Well, empirical evidence tells us that it is a long, slow process, in which experience is a key factor. But how do we come by that evidence? Obviously, by identifying successful people, then tracking back through their careers to see how they advanced. But does this give us the answers we seek? Or does it merely tell us how a particular person got to where they are?

Working one's way up through an organization is immensely valuable. Understanding the intricacies of a company and the ways of an industry can make the difference between success and failure. But given that South African companies don't have the luxury of time, there is a compelling argument for trying to short-circuit the development process.

One step would be to ensure that promising people are given as much exposure as possible to the issues and individuals influencing their organizations. In other words, to involve them in the "big conversations" rather than just the small ones. This would enrich their understanding of the macro environment, engage them in high-level debate, and enable them to watch first-hand how key decisions get made.

A second step would be to hone their skills in the key leadership functions. There is no mystery about these. *The purpose of a leader is to deliver specific results through others*. So the most important work of a leader is to create a "community of champions". This, in turn, requires that leaders do these things:

1. Define direction.
2. Decide priorities.
3. Acquire, develop, and align resources.
4. Drive action.
5. Inspire innovation.
6. Foster learning.
7. Build confidence.

The good news is, we know a good deal about how to do these things – and therefore how to equip others to do them. And while it would be foolish to suggest that anyone can do all of them equally well, or that everyone has what it takes to perform superbly under all conditions, it's even more foolish to overlook possibilities that stare us right in the face.

If organizations simply agreed that these seven factors added up to the work of leaders, they would bring much-needed focus to their debates about leadership. They would know what to train people to do, what to work at, and what to measure and reward.

A third step would be to provide the challenges necessary to test an individual's mettle – and the support to help them succeed. This needs saying, because too many aspirant leaders complain that they aren't trusted with serious work, and get little support when the going gets tough. Besides, "the school of hard knocks" teaches more than all the classrooms in the world; and wisdom – a vital leadership trait – comes mostly from having "been around the block."

Finally, there is the need for ongoing support, encouragement, and counsel. All of which are essential to the learning process – and especially so when time is of the essence, responsibilities grow fast, and decisions get rapidly more difficult and risky.

Every organization is a potential talent incubator. This role must be taken seriously if SA is to deliver on its promise. So the goal of every current management team should be to create tomorrow's teams. The work of every leader should be to develop tomorrow's leaders.

By making leadership more mysterious than it already is, we ensure that we will have too few leaders for tomorrow. By failing to acknowledge that leadership is more about common sense than uncommon gifts, and that human talent cannot be seen until it is allowed to blossom, we anchor ourselves to the past. And that, most people would agree, is not what leadership is about.

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