

## The Nature of Leadership

The recent published literature indicates that we are still a long way off consensus as to the exact nature of leadership. There would appear to be a strong tendency to regard leadership as a 'thing', just waiting for a psychologist to discover exactly what it is or a sociologist to find out where it is! This is perhaps comparable to earlier atomic research, it was known that there must be something making up matter and it needed some serious research effort to find out exactly what it was. When this was mainly achieved enormous practical results followed, sadly some of them very unpleasant. One gets the impression that much of the current leadership research is set on this course, and with similar outcomes envisaged.

There is also a strong tendency to regard leadership as a *single thing*, probably made up of many components or ingredients that somehow come together into a magnificent object to be admired. Consequently, it is also seen as a good thing, unless unscrupulous or evil manipulators apply it.

I think this approach to trying to understand leadership is misguided. Just because leadership can be observed when it is present and noticed when it is absent, it cannot necessarily be given the status of an object. It cannot be touched, measured, stored or bought. An important piece of research yet to be done is to derive a comprehensive and precise classification of different kinds of leadership. It would then be extremely fruitful to discover if there was a common core to all leadership activity that all leaders have to be able to do. Alternatively, it may be that situations and followers are so different that there is a range of leadership behaviours that are specific to particular situations, such as an emerging economy or new technology and none applicable to all. The resolution of this issue, perhaps beyond all others, would help us to progress our understanding of the nature of leadership.

Leadership is the outcome of interactions. They are interactions between people; and people and situations. So to explain them we need to understand what is inside people and the situations in which they find themselves. A great deal of useful work has already been done on leaders' and followers' traits and qualities, i.e. their capacities, inclinations, and values and needs. A fair amount has been done too on different leadership situations e.g. military, government and business. What is in short supply is work on the interactions, the process that pulls these components together, i.e. research towards a model or a process that would enable us to get the interactions *right*. One of the major flaws in many of the current process descriptions of leadership is bringing *purpose* into the model. It is difficult enough trying to describe and explain the process without trying to tie it into achievement of certain objectives. The tools and techniques of any task can be studied and taught to be carried out correctly without recourse to their ultimate use. How they are then put together into a craft of a game is another, separable, issue. Perhaps the study of purpose can be left to the management theorists and process of leadership to the empiricists.

So where does this analysis lead? An approach to the problem of getting interactions between people and situations *right* has been lurking in the literature for decades but its complexity and power has not been generally recognized. In human life there are complex interactions that are also admired and valued. Such as those between people and musical instruments and between people and golf balls! These interactions are

called “skills”, graded sequences of actions directed to a purpose, and where timing is more important than time. There is a large body of research findings on the nature of skills and how they can be inculcated. The management literature abounds with references to skills. There are many books on management with ‘skills’ in their title. They are mainly collections of techniques that effective managers need to be able to do and would provide us useful foundation on which the more complex skill of leadership could be built. It is the main point of this note that it is about time that really serious research effort is put into the theoretical and practical implications of defining leadership as nothing more, nor less, than a magnificent human skill.

So what needs to be done? All skills are made up of three components: cognitive, perceptual and motor. The leadership literature displays that a considerable amount of research has been done on the cognitive, i.e. what a leader needs to know or even be! A fair amount has been done on the perceptual, i.e. what a leader needs to see, hear, sense, have ‘vision’ with different kinds of followers in different kinds of situations. However, relatively little systematic work has been done on the *motor*, how a leader behaves, sounds and looks. These so-called ‘micro-processes’ of leadership are a neglected field, but for some notable exceptions, by both researchers and practitioners alike. Why the neglect?

Perhaps one explanation is market forces. Managers who aspire to be called leaders appear to prefer a quick fix, a secret formula or a magic potion. The suggestion that the key lays within themselves and they would have to spend as much time and effort on it as they do learning how to interact with a golf ball is not to their liking. I have heard many senior managers say that they would not be in the position that they are if they did not have sufficient of this skill already. This is sad as skills-- learning how, unlike knowledge -- learning about, can only be acquired over time with the help of coaches. This is time consuming, expensive and labour intensive to teach. So, as was pointed out earlier, a person really has to want to become an effective leader if they are going to expose themselves to the self-awareness and the feedback that it requires, hence the unattractiveness of this ‘skills approach’ to leadership to managers.

The abstract concepts of trust, adaptability, balance and alignment can be attacked by the established techniques of skills analysis. Far more difficult than analyzing routine tasks or even the swing of a golf club, but nevertheless the exercise would establish whether or not such notions have any real claim to existence. What would be established is a catalogue of essential behaviours for leaders that would be trainable. Those that were critical but not trainable would then be the province of the management selector rather than the leadership developer. The elusive solid core, the essential components, of leadership is beginning to emerge. Suggestions are emerging that this may be made up of the verbal behaviour required for collecting information, influencing behaviour and handling emotion. Such a ‘micro-approach’ does not deny the relevance to leadership of the more ‘macro-concepts’ of qualities and purposes, but it does move the emphasis away from discussions of the abstract to considerations of the trainable.