

# WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

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The development of the Leadership Theory has floundered somewhat. (Of course, looking at the flood gates of leadership training currently on offer in every corner of the globe would prompt one to think the opposite. Nonetheless most managers who go near a leadership training course (even big ticket programmes at the best business schools) come away wondering whether the knowledge acquired really has equipped them in this violently changing world with what it takes to be a leader.

The fact is that most of our leadership training is outmoded. Based on my work with the CEOs and Chief Executives all around the globe, specially during the last decade, I have come to believe that the current leadership crisis is basically a leadership development crisis. It is easy to dismiss strong leadership as the product of simply auspicious genes. There are no born leaders. If they are, they are so few that people have not heard of them. "Biographies of great leaders sometimes read". say Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus." as if they had entered the world with an extraordinary genetic endowment ----- Don't believe it." Charles Garfield who studied 450 outstanding individuals confirm that peak performers are made not born.". He says, everyone of the performers. we studied confirms that the gap can be spanned. People can learn how to be peak performers. Pavarotti was an average singer in the boys' choir when he was a teenager."

Peter Drucker echoes the same thoughts. He debunks the myth of charisma of born leader in these words. "The only one and one personality trait the affective ones '(leaders) I have encountered did have in common was something they did not have, they had little or "no" charisma and little use either for the term or what it signifies." According to him, "leadership must be learnt and can be learnt."

The question is if leadership can be learnt why do we have so few real leaders. What is wrong with our learning'? Before we assume this question let us first ask for the tumpteenth time "What is Leadership'?" Peter Drucker the doyen of management thought during the last 50 years talks of simple things.

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It is obvious that the phenomenal pace of change has made the traditional methods of executive training and education meaningless. Consequently even the haloed centres of business education such as the world's best schools do not produce the leadership our organisations need. According to James F. Bolt chairman of USA's Executive Development Associates following are some of the major shortcomings of current leadership development programs:

1. Training is not comprehensive. In his 1989 work, *The Managerial Mystique*, Harvard Business School professor Abraham Zaleznik writes that leadership is made up of "substance, humanity and morality. We are painfully short of all three qualities in our collective lives." Executive education has focussed primarily on business skills. Also, most leadership seminars have presented leadership as an isolated issue apart from the individual and business challenges executives face, suggesting that leadership can simply be added on top of other skills, much like picking up a foreign language before going overseas. Such narrow training produces leaders who are not fully developed. Executives seeking a complete development package must often acquire it piecemeal. To develop leadership skills, they might spend a summer in a university executive program. This ad hoc approach is ineffective.
2. Training offers a "quick fix" The belief that leadership can be developed through an isolated day-long or week-long seminar is unrealistic. To be effective, training must be ongoing and long term.
3. Training is generic and outdated. Until recently, university programs often ignored real-world problems. A recent *Business Week* article pointed out the lack of relevance in executive education programs offered by some of the world's most prestigious universities: "They [the participating managers] griped about having to debate dated case

studies from the 1970s, which they deemed of little relevance in today's world. Some complained that cases they studied nearly 20 years earlier as MBA students are still being taught." Mini-MBA programs also tend to be too generic, lacking strategy-based, meaningful agendas. Few approaches give participants the opportunity to integrate a program's content with issues geared to their own organisations. Learning, then, tends to remain conceptual because executives never have the chance to put it into actual practice.

4. Training ignores leadership. One of Zaleznik's primary complaints is that many so-called leadership training programs, tending to be functionally and technically oriented. Our rigorous undergraduate and professional level MBA programs have produced legions of impeccably skilled managers with superb quantitative and management abilities. These executives later discover that they were taught ;how to manage but were never given a chance to learn how to lead."

According to Bolt most of the job development produces one-dimensional executives with overly developed quantitative and analytical skills. They are capable of managing but unfit to lead. Bolt has, therefore recommended a three dimensional leadership model as the new imperative. The three dimensional framework business, leadership and personal effective skills.

A good starting point, according to Paul Taffinder, author of 'The New Leaders' and Big Change', for those seeking for what leadership is, to look back at President Kennedy, specifically his speech to Congress on 25, May 1961, when he asked the American people to commit to the extraordinary venture of landing a man on the moon.

Of course, delivering speeches is not leadership, but the entire text of Kennedy's speech provides an excellent record of what leadership is and how it works, there is the context what JFK describes as 'extraordinary times'. There is the risk, both of failure and inaction. There is unpredictability, the capacity to surprise the audience and the nation with the ambition and breathtaking extent of the programme. There is the conviction that it is the right thing to do. And finally there is the creation of a critical mass sufficient to launch and sustain the whole enormous enterprise.

## **Context**

These are extraordinary times. And we face an extraordinary challenge. ( our strength as well as our convictions have imposed upon this nation the role of leader in freedom's cause. So begins the speech. The immediacy with which Kennedy sets the context is striking. Although the full speech ranges across economic and social progress in the US defence, intelligence, disarmament and space, the context he emphasises is the commitment to freedom and the United States' role in history. Moreover, he states clearly at the outset that the context itself is not ordinary and, by implication, that his expectations of both himself and his nation cannot be ordinary either. This is where people begin to understand that they can rise beyond the humdrum of life and achieve far more than they ever believed possible.

Other writers might call this vision, but the word 'vision' misses the point. It has come to imply strategy, long-range plans, subordinate goals. But when leaders create context, they articulate for individuals their place and role in an enterprise both in striving for a future goal and in knowing what it means. To know what it means is to understand, at an intellectual and an emotional level, where your enterprise itself stands in relation to the world, in the past, now and\_ in the future.

It is true to say that it is when the world around us is at its most humdrum or its most confusing that we earn for leadership to give clarity to this context.

## **Risk**

While we cannot guarantee that we shall one day be first, we can guarantee that any failure to make this effort will make us last. We face an additional risk by making it's full view of the World but ... this very risk enhances our stature when we are successful.

This is the making of risk, the creation of opportunity. Risk making and risk taking are dangerous. Risks of the magnitude JFK was outlining have been diminished by time. People have walked on the Moon. Unmanned probes

have explored Mars, Venus, Saturn, Jupiter and beyond. Satellites are an everyday part of life. Indeed our day-to-day communications and entertainment depend on them. Organisations like CNN could not have existed otherwise.

We will not follow people who lack belief in themselves and their goals.

We take this technology for granted. In 1961, when Kennedy made his speech, the most the US had achieved was Alan Shepard's 15 minute 22 second sub-orbital space-flight disparagingly dubbed a 'flea-hop'. It is only with a wrench that we realise how great was the risk attendant on an idea to take people to the moon for the first time.

Making the risk public is even more dangerous, particularly for politicians or anyone in the public eye. Explaining risk to people can lead to disaster. Like a grenade, it can go off in your face. Knowledge of risk can bring fear, and fear paralysis. Using it to your advantage, to sweep aside reservations and active resistance and to mobilise effort takes skill. Managers control risk; leaders take risks. Threat and fear of failure then become catalysts for action, challenges to which individuals aspire.

### **Unpredictability**

Since early in my term, our efforts in space have been under review .... Now it is time to take longer strides - time for a great new American enterprise - time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth.

Going beyond the norm, challenging the status quo always, of its very nature, requires unpredictability. Managers are part of the pattern, leaders move outside it. They change the pattern, both inside their firms and outside, in their markets.

In Britain in 1970 an official of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) remarked, 'Democracy is not something that happens naturally in organisations, bureaucracy is.' Big organisations are fat and sluggish - most of them anyway. Even the best such as IBM fall because inertia becomes all-pervasive. That organisations are sluggish, bored, and what we must remember is the obvious, made up of people and people become lose their edge.

It is the unpredictable quality of leadership that grabs attention, that turns heads from the constantly competing demands of the here-and-now and the dangers of navel-gazing. Some business leaders emphasise this quality above others. Ricardo Semler, chief executive of the Brazilian company Semco's, threw out all the rules when he took over. 'Semco's standard policy is no policy,' he declares in his book "Maverick", the title of which says it all.

### **Conviction**

If we are to go only half way or reduce our sights in the face of difficulty, in my judgement it would be better not to go at all.

Kennedy's message is unequivocal. Despite saying in his very next sentence, 'Now this is a choice which this country must make,' his own conviction is plain. He is leading the nation. Later he declares: 'I believe we should go to the moon.'

Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth century German philosopher, observed: 'Men believe in the truth of all that is seen to be strongly believed in.' It matters not that the truth is vile: Hitler was the adored leader of a nation which believed fervently in his 'truths'. What counts is conviction.