

Leadership Reconceptualised: Back to the Future

Regent Business School

Paresh Soni
Ahmed Shaikh
Richard Cowden

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In our previous introductory submission on *Leadership Reconceptualised*, a team of academics involved in the re-curriculation of the MBA programme at REGENT Business School (RBS) provided a broad stroke canvas against which they sketched some of the major issues involved in the theory, epistemology and praxis of the question of *leadership*.

In this issue, another team, anchored by Mr. Ahmed Shaikh (Chairperson of the Re-curriculation Planning team at RBS) has been entasked with the perennial question of whether *leadership* can be learnt.

Given the paucity of skills in *leadership*, worldwide, especially in the context of the problematique of globalisation, sustainable economic development and the global financial crisis have become a cause of serious concern. The challenge has become even more accentuated in emerging countries, South Africa, included.

In order to address the perennial question of *leadership*, it is necessary define and critically examine what is meant by the concept. What, for example, are the intrinsic values and competencies of *leadership*?

To begin with, any cursory scan of the definition of the word or concept of *leadership* clearly indicates there are as many definitions of the concept as there are questions. It depends on who the respondent is. One thing is certain, though, it is an abstract and elusive term. It could easily be likened to the old adage - “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. It could also be equated to a layperson’s understanding of the concept of *electricity*. We know its function – it provides energy. But how does it work? The answer is hard to pin down. In a similar fashion, one can readily identify the key competencies and intrinsic values of leadership, but when it comes to precise definitions, it becomes an issue of relativity – its meaning or value can only be established in relation to something else. It changes according to circumstances or context. It informs and is informed.

Leadership, therefore, is a transformative concept. It changes with time, context, values, circumstances and paradigmatic episodes. It does, however, include some intrinsic values in its definition.

Indeed, if *leadership* is an abstraction, not simply definable, then what is it? How, for example, does one or evaluate it. If it were a bundle of measurables, then we could provide a guidebook or template. We all know that a keen sports person is incapable of become good at his or her sport, by just reading about the necessary competencies required. It goes far beyond that. It is, in a sense, an intrinsic value or 'trait' – you either have it, or you don't. As Peter Drucker, a leading academic in *leadership* theory opined - "leaders are born" and they have some identifiable skills, *traits or values*, which cannot be taught. Drucker's work has spawned a host of books and articles on *leadership*, either concurring with his thesis or refuting it.

Some recent authors (James Kouzes and Barry Posner, for example) on leadership have suggested otherwise. They believe that these traits can be taught, over a period of time. There are still others, such as Lloyd Edwards who hypothesise that *leadership* can be learnt, but not taught.

In order to critically analyse these differing schools of thought, it is necessary to identify a set of competencies which can identify the mark of good *leadership*. In this respect, we are of the view that a useful exercise would be to comparatively identify similar descriptions for competent *management*.

A composite of research outcomes regarding descriptions of a competent leader or a manager reveals that there is a fundamental difference. A 'competent' leader would have to be compassionate, honest, supportive, courageous, focused, humble, flexible, understanding, respectful, communicative, empathetic, reliable, assertive, tactical, technically savvy, financially capable, and good at organising, scheduling, delegating, planning, Above all else, a mentor. A 'competent' manager, on the other hand, is identified as someone who is responsible, accountable, assertive and good at organising, scheduling, delegating, planning, coordinating, reporting, budgeting, staffing and directing.

The results reveal a primary difference between descriptions of a leader and a manager. The majority of management competencies are extrinsic and teachable. In sharp contrast, competencies for a leader are value-based. They are intrinsic and reflect the qualities of ones being and consciousness. Is it, therefore, possible to teach one about trustworthiness, honesty, compassion, empathy and humility, to boot? *Leadership*, as a result, is about intrinsic values being observed and appreciated by those who choose to follow. It is almost similar to the concept of *respect*. We cannot expect to be respected if we do not respect others. It is, in a sense, a dialectical relationship.

The critical and comparative analysis of competencies between a leader and a manager reveals that unlike a manager's competencies, a leader's intrinsic values and competencies cannot be taught. It would seem that while management is focused on tasks, leadership is focused on a person.

Can *leadership* be learnt? This question has taken on increased significance in recent years. In this regard, a number of contemporary authors on *leadership* have examined issues of a leader's character or personality traits. In his book "On Becoming a Leader", Warren Bennis identifies a list of positive traits in all leaders. *Inter alia*, the main traits that stand out are "vision", "inspiration", "trustworthiness" and "empathy".

Seemingly, much of the leadership literature includes as an implicit assumption, the belief that positive characteristics can-and-should be encouraged and practiced by leaders. Towards this end, some organisations are even moving away from viewing *leadership* solely in terms of leader attributes. They define *leadership* by a set of competencies that guide *leadership* development at all levels of their organisation.

Yet other organisations are employing their most competent leaders to act as mentors. They work on the assumption that a good leader will innately take on the responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. In the end, it also depends on the mentee, if he or she is willing to learn. This thesis of *leadership* also presupposes that everyone has the basic seeds of leadership within them and how these are developed and cultivated will determine whether leadership qualities develop in an individual.

Notwithstanding the above, it is our conviction that an educational programme in *leadership* can only teach skills. It cannot teach character or vision. *Leadership* therefore, cannot be taught, it must be learned. Learning how to be a leader is a highly personal process and is dependent on the personal circumstances of an individual. Whether it is formal or informal, lifelong learning suggests that we all continue to be shaped by those who are around us and perhaps the most influential is learning from our personal experiences by making meaning out of them. A leader, thus, has to be an *organic intellectual* (borrowing from Antonio Gramsci's and Paulo Friere's literary works).

In summation, we have become aware that leadership is an abstract concept and that it cannot be taught, but learnt. We also understand that it includes intrinsic values and is transformative. Furthermore, we have been informed that *leadership* is an increasingly omnipresent subject and a theme of hundreds of books and academic articles. Simultaneously, it has become the mainstay of the curriculum of many business schools and has been directed toward addressing the paucity of *leadership* "skills", globally. Increasingly, *leadership* is viewed as inherently collaborative, social, and relational processes and is definitely not a static.

In terms of the future, globalisation and the knowledge society will have profound effects in the way we understand the *leadership* concept, especially in its shared context of an organisation. As a result, *leadership* will be understood as the

collective capacity of all members of an organisation to accomplish critical tasks. Traversing this new conceptual minefield of *leadership* will require a deeper understanding of the role of organisational systems and culture. It will require a variety of approaches to *leadership* theory, epistemology and praxis.

At Regent Business School, we have adopted a theoretical posture which fundamentally accepts that *leadership* cannot be taught, but can be learnt. In this respect, our *leadership* pedagogy and praxis will require a critical dispensation on the part of academia and students, alike. So, for example, when we deal with questions of serious lapses in *leadership* actions and deeds, we will urge our students to think critically and dialectically and not to simply tender simplistic uni-dimensional answers, but to ask moral questions. A good starting point is to read the works of Plato on “The Republic”.

Certainly, leadership is a perennial question and will always take us back to the future.

In the next submission, writers from Regent Business School will deal with the fundamental differences between *leadership* and *management*.

We welcome any suggestions, comments and critique.

Paresh Soni is Institutional Researcher at the Management College of Southern Africa

Ahmed Shaikh is MD and Chairperson of the Curriculum Planning Team at REGENT Business School

Richard Cowden is an Academic and Researcher at REGENT Business School

The authors can be contacted at www.regent.ac.za