

# Leadership: Reconceptualised

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In a recent curriculum exercise for the new MBA programme, the planning task team at Regent Business School (RBS) identified *Leadership* as one of the major themes of the programme. During the planning process important debates also ensued with specific reference to what was meant by the term, *leadership*. It made the team appreciate the fact that identifying a theme was much easier than defining what was collectively meant by the concept – *leadership*.

The centrality of the deliberations unequivocally alerted the team to the fact that answers were being sought about the perennial question of leadership. It was, in essence, the equivalent to a benchmarking exercise. The debates covered a wide spectrum of views and ranged from discussions that resonated with issues of *leadership* paradigms and theories; *leadership* epistemology and pedagogy; whether *leadership* can be taught; the influence of the process of globalisation and the recent financial crises on *leadership*; whether good *leadership* is a mutually exclusive or inclusive process; the paucity of good leaders; whether good *leadership* is an intrinsic value for the overall success of all organisations; the characteristics of good *leadership*; the importance of values, ethics and emotional intelligence in shaping an influential leader; and finally, questioning the appropriateness of *leadership* as a major theme within the MBA curriculum.

At the conclusion of the debates, the team concurred that a critical examination of the concept of *leadership* was beyond the scope of the planning exercise. A four-member team (the authors of this article) was assigned the task of interrogating the concept of *leadership* and providing a study document that could inform a major defining aspect of the MBA curriculum. The planning task team did, however, reach at a consensus regarding the intrinsic value of *leadership*, especially in the governance of all organisations. The team also agreed that *leadership* is a significant compass point for the success of all organisations and for those developing business education programmes.

This short essay is a starting point in an effort to document a contextual framework for the thematic rubric of *leadership* at in a qualification. The paper does not in any way pretend to be a *magna carta* on the question of *leadership*. What follows,

therefore, is a broad-stroke theoretical approach to highlight the major issues and debates that encompass the question of leadership.

Any examination of the concept of *leadership*, signals to the researcher or scholar that the process of *leadership* does not occur in a vacuum. It has to be contextualised. To this extent, in the contemporary period, the process of globalisation and the recent financial crisis stand out as valuable moments which catalytically influence *leadership* practice and academic debates, thereof.

In respect of the above, the process of globalisation has shown that we live in a complex world where quantum revolutions in technology, contribute in the explosion of knowledge. Almost every economy in the world and even the remotest area has become a part of the 'global village'. Quintessentially, this means that leaders, whether in the private, public or civic sector, are obliged to be informed about new global realities. Diversity becomes a keyword. In this context, global trading, for example, becomes an exercise far beyond traditional macro economics. It is much more complicated and dynamic, and in order to succeed, an effective leader needs to not only understand the macro and micro aspects of trade – he or she has to understand the dynamics of global political economy, the influences of diverse cultures and the subtle nuances of potential trading partners.

The recent financial crisis, likewise, has informed the *leadership* community about the complexity and stresses of a globalised world. For example, we have learned that no country was untouched by the global seismic recession tremor. The aftershocks of the banking, financial and housing failures and government deficits in the USA and Europe caused severe challenges and disruptions throughout the world. Additionally, it not only led academics and critics to question the unethical leadership of finance houses and governments in question, but also apportioned blame to some internationally recognised business schools for having produced disreputable and unethical leaders.

Notwithstanding the fact that the financial crisis has left many nations and business organisations and their *leadership* feeling somewhat struggle weary, it has become increasingly clear that it is opportune for business schools and academics to re-evaluate their understanding of what is meant by *leadership* and how best to proceed in terms of their research and teaching and learning agenda. In the context of globalisation and the aftermath of the financial crisis, it is imperative that the current concept of *leadership* has to be analysed, reconceptualised and redefined.

The question of whether *leadership* is a mutually exclusive or inclusive process, has also led to some critical internal discussions within the four-person task team. It been argued by a team member that *leadership* is a mutually exclusive process and even suggested that leaders are born and that theories which posit the view that the best qualities of *leadership* can be acquired through training and education are misleading. On the other hand, others contend that *leadership* is a mutually inclusive process. They argued that a good leader informs and is informed by the organisation

he or she serves. Moreover, leadership begins with individuals in *leadership* positions, but it doesn't end there. The ability of an organisation to accomplish its goals does not depend solely on the force of will of a leader. As much as these issues are important, they do not in and of themselves help us understand why some organisations succeed where others fail.

Furthermore, proponents of the “mutually inclusive view” are quick to point out that recent research has shown that in order to understand the intrinsic values of *leadership*, the culture of the collective actions of leaders and whom they lead must be interrogated. It is not simply the quality of the individual leader that determines organisational success, but the ability of the collective leadership of the organisation.

The outcomes of the cursory theoretical scan reveal that there are no definitive answers as to which of the theoretical positions are most plausible in dealing with questions of *leadership*. As a group, though, we are in concert with the view that suggests the thematic rubric of *leadership* has to be informed by recent paradigm shifts, and in this respect, the new MBA curriculum would benefit from being strategically guided by solid scholarship. The planning team at RBS is convinced that the theoretical impasse has provided opportunity for an in-depth discourse in *leadership*.

With reference to the process of globalisation and its ramifications, the planning team are also persuaded that a “new brand” of *leadership* is required. It is inevitable that globalisation will unleash new opportunities, hitherto uncharted. Within perspective, globally connected markets, new technologies, competitiveness and *leadership* that thinks and acts across national boundaries will become stronger. Leaders will become capable in understanding and engaging with global and local economic, cultural, legal, and political implications. Indeed, leadership will be contextualised within a global scenario, inclusive of an expanded field of socio-cultural and political vision and values.

New technologies, the explosion of information and the new knowledge society are other factors that have also made global thinking a requirement for future leaders. It will, for example, become incumbent on new leaders to be trained in the liberal arts. Courses such as global political economy, sociology, development studies and environmental studies will become critical. Technology can help break down barriers to international business. Leaders who can make globalisation and an understanding of the information society work in their favour will have a huge comparative advantage.

Intelligence will become another key factor in effective *leadership*. The new leader will have to understand that the information society relies on knowledge workers. The virtual plundering of international boundaries and state sovereignty will allow for osmosis in the free flow of skilled labour and they may well be difficult to retain. They will likely have little organisational loyalty and view themselves as professional free agents who will work for the leader who provides the most developmental

challenge and opportunity. Skills in hiring and retaining key talent will be invaluable for the leader of the future.

Certainly, understanding *leadership* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a complex issue. There are no easy explanations. It is, in short, a learning process.

The concept of *leadership* is at an important juncture in global political economy, leadership epistemology and business education.

We are hopeful that RBS's new leadership praxis will be informed by existing and new paradigm shifts in business education. We are also optimistic that our own research in the field of *leadership* in Africa and the world at large will add further value to the extant knowledge in the field. Towards this end, RBS also looks forward to its graduates providing innovative and thought-provoking inputs into the debate on leadership as they embrace the new MBA curriculum. In return, we intend to provide students with one of the most stimulating and challenging programmes in *leadership* education - one that will hold them in good stead, as budding leaders of the new millennium.

The question of *leadership*, therefore, can be considered as a complex and abstract one. It is contingent, for example, on how we view it. It is also dependent on who is viewing it - a practitioner, an academic or a student. The challenge is to integrate these perceptions of *leadership* through the process of connections into a whole.

Finally, the RBS curriculum planning team, likewise, is of the firm opinion that *leadership* is a dynamic concept and must be understood holistically. Every independent part or process of leadership is important and the optimal relationship between all the parts or processes makes the whole more efficient, effective and insightful. It is a theoretical posture or frame of mind which we urge all our academics to assume as they critically engage with students in their lectures and seminars.

As mentioned previously, this paper does not pretend to offer definitive answers, propositions or conclusions to the question of *leadership*. It simply provides a broad spectrum of views, theories and practice. The primary purpose of this introductory review, as a result, is to direct the reader through the minefield of theory and practice of *leadership*. Within this context, we aim to publish five critical reviews on the trends in *leadership*, as identified in recent literature reviews.

Pursuant to the above, the forthcoming series of papers, aspire to provide detailed and critical aspects of the question of *leadership*. Watch for future articles in the explorations of epistemology, praxis and pedagogy on the concept and practice of *leadership*.

In the interim, we welcome comments, suggestions and critique which could add further value to the discourse on *leadership*.

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