

Introduction

Leadership is ubiquitous. It will emerge in every group. Whether it is an outing with friends, a family vacation, or a business team. Leaders are needed to streamline the complex interactions between people so results can be achieved collectively. Next time you are in a group, pay attention to how the wine is selected or an outing is chosen.

Leaders are also vital to any change within an organization. It is common that change within organizations begins at the top; it only rarely emerges from the bottom up. Leaders make clear what is wrong with the current situation, outline the desired future and provide insight into what they believe are the first steps to take toward that future.

Additionally, leaders are important for social change, although this kind of change often does start from the bottom up; think of the fight against slavery or the Me Too movement. These kinds of changes start bottom up because after all, powerful incumbents benefit from maintaining the status quo, and few enlightened leaders dare to undermine their own position or that of the organization they represent. Yet at some point, the cooperation of incumbent leaders is necessary, as the only alternative would be a revolution to overthrow the existing power by force.

Even in organizations with no formal hierarchy, there are still leaders. Just because there is no organizational pyramid does not mean there are no leaders. They are the driving forces, the engine behind the internal processes, the face to the outside, or a combination of these things. The leader in this case is not at the top of the pyramid, but he or she is still the one determining what is considered important and what needs to be achieved.

Leadership is thus important for organizations and for society. It helps individuals interact with others to achieve results. Results are the end; leadership is the means. So leaders are those who mobilize others to achieve results.

Because leaders shape the world we live and work in, it is important to have a good understanding of what leadership is and is not. This book will focus primarily on what leadership is not, because there is so much erroneous information about leadership going around.

Leadership has become a catch-all term. When I started writing about this topic thirty years ago, leadership was still reserved for a select group in business, politics, civil service, sports and society; it was for the elite, the top executives, the most senior officials. Today, leadership is of, and for, everyone; it has been democratized. There is something to be said for that, but as a result, it has also become a subject on which everyone projects their own imagination, preferences and assumptions. A huge leadership industry has developed, in which, I am sorry to say, fools often speak out. Leadership, however, is too important for nonsense. Therefore, in this book, I will debunk 11 lies about leadership.

Questioning the conceptions and misconceptions about leadership leads to insights about what leadership is not and to ideas about what it actually is. This book not only exposes the lies about leadership, it also reflects on the perspectives, offers insights, and asks questions. At the end of each chapter there are questions for readers to reflect on their personal leadership.

Focusing on the misconceptions around leadership makes this book different from others. My ambition is to offer insights into the truths and fallacies about leadership; this is not a Ten-Step-Handbook to become a better leader.

Other books on leadership often do offer this kind of guidance. They claim to offer a manual for effective leadership, provided you follow the steps they prescribe. However, the universal validity of

the models they preach is not confirmed in practice. The fact is: leadership is not universal. The effectiveness of leaders depends on who they are as a person, the challenges faced by the organization they lead, and the time and culture in which they operate; they are 'horses for courses'.

The problem with many leadership books is that they try to standardize what is not standard. This is due to a fallacy that lumps together the complex and the complicated parts of leadership, when they are essentially different concepts.

'Complicated' is something that is difficult but can be figured out. For example, a clock is complicated, as is a nuclear power plant. Complicated systems can be standardized and reproduced, uncertainties can be eliminated, cause and effect are clear, and the systems are externally controllable.

'Complex' also describes something that is difficult, but complex things are not identically reproducible. Complex systems are unpredictable, nonlinear and paradoxical. They can change at any moment. The same causes do not always lead to the same outcomes. They can have tipping points that lead to rapid, large and irreversible changes. They can be observed from the outside, but not controlled. For example, the flight pattern of a flock of birds and climate patterns and disruptions are complex. You can make the clock exactly the same a hundred times, but birds can never repeat the pattern that their flock flies twice.

The complicated part of leadership can be learned with enough intelligence, practice and perseverance - blood, sweat and tears. It can be standardized and reproduced. This includes, for example, designing budgetary processes, internal compliance or supply chains, setting financial return requirements or learning how to give a presentation to a large audience. Processes can be defined and standardized so that, when repeated, they have a high probability of similar outcomes.

The complex part of leadership is also learnable, but not reproducible. The same blood, sweat and tears are required, but past results do not guarantee the same outcome in the future. You can observe, reflect, experiment, adapt and do it again. This complex part can be described in (auto)biographies and case studies, but not in textbooks. It cannot be standardized and reproduced because it is only truly effective with a specific combination of the person, timing and context. Complexities include motivating and inspiring people, aligning short and long-term goals, reconciling different interests, integrating an acquisition, coaching employees and executing an organizational transformation. It is important to determine which elements of leadership are effective and which are not within the specific combination of person, time and context at that moment. Equally important to recognize is that repetition in another situation does not necessarily lead to the same result. Manuals, standardizations and 'universal guidelines' do not work with complexity.

There are times that you feel in every fiber of your being that you are witnessing genius moments of leadership. You can only experience those and possibly describe and analyze them afterwards. However, they cannot be reproduced. It's like a performance of Mahler's Fourth, which sometimes causes goosebumps while at other times the same piece is excellent but falls short of this achievement. Or a dish in a restaurant that can sometimes bring tears of happiness to your eyes and other times is just a delicious meal. This is the mystery of life: you can experience it, you can recognize it as special, but you cannot repeat it. As the Indian guru Osho said, "Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved."

The issue with many leadership books is that they approach the complex part of leadership as if it is complicated. They try to standardize approaches, determine causes, effects and predictable outcomes, and ultimately arrive at a manageable and reproducible system. But this approach is doomed to fail.

The most viable approach to the complexity of leadership is to name what does and does not work within the specific context of the person, organization, challenge and timing. The conclusions that are drawn from that cannot be prescribed to others, but they can be offered for learning and inspiration so that other leaders can apply what serves them in their own situation. This book is therefore intended for teaching, inspiration as well as enjoyment.