

What Leaders Read 1

The Six Dimensions of Leadership Andrew Brown

2000, Random House

Andrew Brown lectures at the Judge Institute of Management Studies at Cambridge University. He opens his book with a quote from that other noted writer on leadership, Warren Bennis, who asserts: "It is the paradox of our times that precisely when the trust and credibility of leaders are at their lowest...we most need people who can lead" (Bennis, W, 1976, *The Unconscious Conspiracy*, New York, Amacom). Written in 1976, that quote appears to be as apposite today as it was then, maybe more so, and perhaps reflects a generally held view of leadership, which seems to be that it is a commodity in ever-decreasing supply.

The author states that his book is for anyone with an interest in what leadership is and what leaders do, and as such firmly establishes it as an exploration of the phenomenon of leadership rather than as a leadership development text. However, each chapter concludes with a set of questions designed to prompt the reader to consider his or her own leadership style in the light of the subject in hand. Though somewhat cursory, they serve to encourage personal reflection and may help some to alter their outlook or practices.

Brown offers us his novel approach to the subject as a new way of seeing the concept of leadership and as an antidote to the somewhat tired phrases that have come to be associated with the leadership literature. Rather than describe the type of leadership (charismatic, transformational, autocratic) or the personal attributes of leaders (traits, personality types) he examines the roles that leaders adopt, whether consciously or unknowingly, and describes them as "dimensions". To be really effective, he asserts, leaders must be adept in all of the roles; those who are dominated by a single role, who lack the intuitive ability to adapt their behaviours and succumb to "role capture", will be ultimately flawed.

The book is largely based on examples drawn from business and politics. The cases considered are often American, reflecting the preponderance of American companies in the corporate history genre, but also, refreshingly, draw on material from Japan, South Korea, Britain, Sweden, Burma, India, Australia, Germany and Russia. For a British audience some of the details may feel a little too Americanised, but given that the USA is by far the largest market for this type of book it is easy to see why that is so.

It is a shortish book (195 pages, small format, average-sized typeface) and both readable and enjoyable, but may be best appreciated at six sittings to allow each individual dimension to resonate before moving on to the next in the series.

The six dimensions of the book's title are: hero, actor, immortalist, power-broker, ambassador and victim. As in the book, each is considered here in turn.

Hero

This is one role that many would readily identify with leaders. The hero is a liberating force: a straightforward, incorruptible individual who is dedicated to the cause and who, through a process of identification, diminishes our own anxieties. Their examples are followed by their subordinates, and as Albert Schweitzer, renowned philosopher and humanitarian, is quoted by Brown: "Example is not the main thing in influencing others – it is the only thing".

Brown identifies four sub-groups of hero: epic, symbolic, playful and warrior. Each is illustrated with a handful of exemplars so that the reader is introduced to the epic heroes such as Ted Turner, the Cadbury family and Chung Ju Yung, the founder of Hyundai. These are the people who overcome adversity and undertake a perilous struggle to prevail against the odds and who are imbued retrospectively with special qualities, often with a moral dimension.

The symbolic hero means something significant to others outside the organisation. Such heroes have high levels of public recognition and huge symbolic or iconic value. Examples might include Richard Branson of the Virgin group, or the Siemens brothers, who pioneered the commercialisation of electricity.

Playful heroes are those who believe that work should be fun. They encourage playful activity and reduce the barriers between the workforce by diminishing the element of threat. As the author states: "Comedy is sanctioned doubt, a permitted and honoured way of expressing doubt over the majesty and wisdom of our superiors". Thus, by encouraging appropriate comedy and humour in an organisation the playful hero acknowledges the fact that he is fallible and increases his accessibility to his subordinates.

The warrior hero may claim to serve the market by weeding out the weak and defeating the unfit in a business context. Alternatively, some individuals may simply enjoy the ecstasy of battle. Often they are people characterised as intolerant or dominant, and in certain circumstances can be highly effective. Brown further subdivides this subdivision into the chevalier, the rifleman, the executioner and so forth, which seems rather like gilding the lily. Examples of warrior heroes are General Patten, Ray Kroc of McDonalds restaurants and Robert Maxwell, the latter illustrating the point made earlier that leaders who become victims of "role capture" will not succeed in the long run.

Whilst some undoubtedly adopt the role of hero instinctively, the author states that some realise the benefit to be had from casting themselves in the role and learn from the examples of mythical or traditional heroes.

Heroes can be dangerous. Beware the leaders who think the organisation's success is due to their unique abilities and does not recognise that their status derives from the perceptions of others. To be a hero, Brown tells us, is to risk being recast as a villain by a capricious public.

Actor

"Leaders deal in symbols." So said the leading management writer, Tom Peters. His point is that the leader cannot know all the intricacies of an organisation of any size and cannot lead through policy alone, but must exercise control through what he or she says or does. Effective leaders, the author observes, need to be consummate actors. Having asserted this, the author later concedes that some great leaders have been so without being great actors. He draws parallels between the processes of managing and leading and the performances of artistes, variously termed poets, rhetoricians, storytellers and showmen (and women).

The poet frames images in order to convey overarching concepts by making bold statements and simple messages. The rhetorician crafts messages from the emotionally expressive use of language and persuasive written and spoken communication. Rhetoric is a skill that can be learnt and, if not mastered, can at least be bought with the help of writers and coaches. Storytellers extend their reach throughout their organisation and enrich the cultural fabric by drawing subordinates' attention to salient issues and reducing the level of complexity that they have to cope with. Brown argues that, in contrast to the rhetorician, the storyteller is often intuitive. The actor-showman demonstrates theatricality through spontaneity and expressiveness. As such they are closely watched individuals, and their actions are mimicked and mirrored within their organisations. As an example Brown cites the differing fortunes of American presidents Carter and Reagan. Carter, superbly briefed, and with a detailed grasp of issues but ultimately uninspiring performances, was never the leader that Reagan, an ex-Hollywood actor, proved to be.

Acting is not the answer to a would-be leader's wishes, however. For a performance to be good it must be authentic, the cast must be willing and the audience empathetic. Anyone found to be (or suspected of) playing a part is guilty in the audience's eyes of puncturing the illusion and eroding the suspension of disbelief, since to a large extent followers tend to conflate the role with the individual. Great acting can only be achieved if the actor really believes in the reality and has the skills with which to convey that reality.

Immortalist

Andrew Brown is keen on the pithy quote to introduce a new idea, and to broach the concept of the immortalist he turns to the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man".

The process of imprinting the leader's personality on an organisation has been termed "the creative deployment of self" (Bennis, W & Nanus, B, 1985, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, New York, Harper and Row). This phrase reflects the notion of leaders and their organisations being two facets of the same entity, and illustrates why the character of the leader is of great importance. The constructive immortalist is able to stand back from the situation and not be consumed by it, whereas the destructive immortalist is often conceited and dramatic and insensitive to the conditions in which he or she operates. The line between the two is a fine one, and Brown details some of the personality traits that often mark out the destructive immortalist.

The problem for the leader is to harness high self-esteem without succumbing to the darker side: the inability to admit fallibility and the development of an edifice complex.

Power-broker

Leaders deal in power and influence. Organisations are political arenas in which individuals and factions vie for position. Cecil Rhodes said that money equals power; however, power is bound up in resources available to the leader: not only money and assets but skills, charisma, energy and so on.

The exercise of influence through power is described by the author in another four sub-groupings (it seems that "six dimensions" made for a snappier title than the twenty-two that this reader counted): despot, manipulator, conductor and empowerer.

Though it may sound wholly negative, the role of despot is sometimes necessary in enforcing change amid turmoil. However, despots rule largely by fear, and it is difficult to separate the positive from the negative aspects of the role.

Manipulators seek to shape the environment in which they operate more stealthily and subtly than despots. By making subordinates feel encouraged and supported they often achieve more compliant and less complaining followers.

Likened by Brown to jazz band maestros, conductor power-brokers seek to achieve balance in their organisations by selecting, manoeuvring and combining individuals so as to ensure that each plays to his full potential. A large part of being this style of leader comes from listening.

The empowerer also relies on subordinates playing their roles. He or she authorises people to act by delegating responsibility and allowing them the freedom to make mistakes, as long as these are recognised, rectified and learnt from. At its apogee the concept is akin to Greenleaf's "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, R K, 1977, *Servant leadership*, New York, Paulist Press). This is also the basis of the saying, often attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: "Of the great leader the people will say, 'we did it ourselves'". In other words, by ceding direct control to subordinates the leader gains a more strategic power to influence the direction of the organisation.

Leaders readily associate with the role of power-broker. To be really successful they must be able to be each of the four sub-types as circumstances dictate, and that is far from simple.

Ambassador

Organisations operate within society and are not closed systems. One of the roles of the leader, therefore, is to act as a link to the external environment so as to establish what Brown terms "legitimacy", or public profile. This is achieved by building relationships and humanising the corporate image by acting as the public face of the organisation.

Great leaders are their organisations' most valuable ambassadors. In addition, it is the role of a leader to act as an internal ambassador, travelling throughout the organisation and helping to disseminate information.

As one might expect, there are sub-dimensions to the ambassador role (four). "Relationship builders" interact with government, the press and trade bodies. "Salespeople" go out there and make deals. "Melders" keep the team together through their appreciation of personalities and adroit handling of internal politics. "Information acquirers" know huge amounts about the organisation and ensure that they retain control in that manner.

Victim

This may seem an odd notion to some readers, since the most obvious connotations of "victim" are negative. However, by *willingly* adopting the role, leaders can turn it to their own and their organisations' advantages. A leader's willingness to take the blame for something when they are not directly responsible can indicate great self-confidence and can serve to protect others within the organisation, giving them a sense of security and trust. By demonstrating that the organisation was a victim of circumstance the leader can create a symbolic advantage, in that people are less inclined to kick a man when he is down.

Being a willing victim can also be a powerful tool in times of direct failure. It indicates to employees that no one in the organisation is right all of the time and that risk-taking is tolerated. By demonstrating to the outside world that the organisation accepts and even expects failure but uses it as a learning tool, the leader implicitly conveys the fact that the organisation is not content to rest on its laurels but will push the boundaries in order to improve performance. Without an acknowledgement of fallibility, leaders are treated as deities and there are no role models for others to follow.

A skilled leader knows when and how to play the victim card. Used inappropriately it can backfire, but in the hands of an expert it can yield immensely powerful results. Consider, for instance, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma (Myanmar) or Richard Branson as the target of British Airways' ire in the early 1990s. Taken to its ultimate conclusion the willing victim becomes a martyr and inspires followers long after his or her death.

Conclusion

Leaders cannot be made but aspiring leaders can learn. Brown's thesis is that, with appropriate education and helpful experience, we can learn what it is that leaders do, but that to be a successful leader requires personal integrity, maturity, wisdom and courage.

Constantly successful leadership, he assures us, is a complicated and exhausting process requiring excellence in most, if not all, of the six dimensions.

As to the number of dimensions: Brown admits that different authors have identified others such as sorcerer (guru, priest, prophet), anthropologist, moralist and servant. To a certain extent these are variations on some of his own themes, however, and by restricting the number to six the author seeks to make the essence of leadership more readily identifiable. Perhaps the title would be more accurate without the definite article.

Discussion

The Six Dimensions of Leadership is undoubtedly a very novel take on the subject and one which stands out from the crowd. The metaphorical language assists the reader to grasp concepts that might otherwise appear abstract and difficult to explain. Similarly, the use of real-life examples illustrates the points that the author makes throughout the book.

Unfortunately, however, the examples are repetitious and too numerous. The same individuals are used over and over again, and in many cases they are the same examples that have been used in any number of other leadership texts (Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch, Richard Branson, Jan Carlzon etc). This is not to say that they are not valid case studies, but there must be other successful leaders out there whose stories are just waiting to be told. The fact that the individuals in question run enormous organisations does not necessarily make them more inspiring, and after a while the continued use of billions of dollars and thousands of employees as units of measure grates. An unfortunate pitfall of using contemporary leaders as examples is illustrated by the frequent references to exiled ex-Chief Executive of Polly Peck, Asil Nadir, who was arrested and fled to Northern Cyprus shortly after publication of the book.

If one is able to see past these stylistic tics and concentrate on the substance of what Andrew Brown has written, the experience is truly enlightening and entertaining, stimulating and challenging.