

Leadership: What it is and how to develop it
by Jonathan Gosling

It is possible to summarise the objective of leadership as “direction setting”. In a large organisation these two simple words encapsulate a host of intriguing problems, sometimes nearly impossible to resolve because they involve arts of persuasion, intuition, and sheer bravado just as much as sciences of analysis, synthesis and design.

The problem with defining leadership as “direction setting” is analogous to the problem of defining strategy as competitive positioning. It becomes too cerebral, theoretical and may be little more than wishful thinking. We must go beyond the intellectual activity of setting directions to the pragmatics of getting things done. In organisations things get done via people and via organising - approaches informed by psychology on the one hand, or sociology on the other.

Leadership development has been dominated by psychological approaches, often reduced to so-called ‘people skills’. Many MBA programmes now include sections on team-building, coaching, performance-management reviews, presentation skills and even rhetoric. But being ‘good at’ something is not the same as ‘being good’; and we inevitably look to our leaders to set an example; to represent the virtues we hold to be good. Indeed, there is a long and honourable history for treating these as essential leadership attributes, stretching back to the ancient Greeks in, for example, the advice that Alcibiades gives to Socrates¹.

“And if you are to manage the affairs of the city rightly and well, you must impart virtue to the citizens – which you cannot do unless you possess this virtue yourself.

You yourself, then, should first acquire virtue, and so should any other who means to govern and manage not only himself and his own private affairs, but the state and the affairs of the state”.

¹ See Gosling, J. (1996) ‘Plato on the education of managers’, in R. French and C. Grey (eds) *Rethinking Management Education*. London: Sage Publications.

So, in the psychologists' view, leaders must be skilful and virtuous. Virtue is to do with personal conduct and the ends to which one is striving – in a rapidly-changing, multi-cultural world, knowing what is the right thing to do is becoming harder and harder.

Many leaders suspect they are perceived as the products (and recipients) of the projected hopes and fears of their colleagues and of wider society. Traditional leadership courses, aimed at personal skills, are not much use here. If a group wants someone to provide order and direction – they'll find one! Nonetheless, for most people, improving their chances of successful experiences in leadership becomes a matter of either selecting the right environment (including other team members, industry-type, etc) or adjusting their personality in some way. Leadership development is a kind of 'character-building'.

MBA classrooms have a lot to answer for. Seated in rows, taught a series of topics presented as discrete functional disciplines or as bounded problems to solve, it is not surprising that students approach leadership as a matter of personality and skill. But it is by no means clear that this is enough to enable them to take up positions of authority, nor to exercise power in a responsible manner - perhaps a more realistic definition of leadership than that with which we started. To use power responsibly requires a strong sense of duty - principally to make the kinds of choices that express values (what we consider to be good) rather than simply to discover the 'right' answer to a well-bounded problem. Leadership is network dependent - structurally, on others who become followers; substantially, on the quality of the relationships amongst actors; and systemically on the specific and concrete work in which all these people are engaged. Leading is a 'practice' of a community - which involves some technical skills, some personality adjustment, and an appropriate culture. The first two receive most attention on MBAs, but to develop 'real' leadership we would need to emphasise the discursive and relational process of leading – in other words, good quality conversations. Good leadership development can be done. For example, see the MA in Leadership Studies at Exeter

(www.leadership-studies.com). So what are the key elements? Firstly, participants should be practising managers with current leadership responsibilities that oblige them to be realistic about suggestions for action. Secondly, they should work in groups to enable detailed and empathetic consideration of all the angles. Thirdly, at least half their time in classroom should be spent on their own issues - which means that only half the time can be taken by lecturers. Fourthly, they should approach the subject in ways which encourage fresh thinking and which are open to emotional and ethical content - which means working in various mindsets², instead of through the traditional business functions. Fifthly, they should include structured observation of power relations in real time, both in the workplace and in the classroom itself.

All in all, leadership development should develop the 'character', integrity, skills and discursive intelligence necessary for the responsible exercise of power.

² See Gosling, J. and Mintzberg, H. (2003) The Five Minds of a Manager. *Harvard Business Review*, November.