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The leaders we deserve
Prof Darren Dalcher
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

The leaders we deserve?

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Over the years, many of us have must have looked at our own bosses and wondered how they ever became leaders. We all recognise the profile; bereft of strategic thinking, enmeshed in local and personal considerations, unable to see the horizon of opportunities, antagonistic, incapable of inspiring others, lacking a vision, unable to consider consequences and options, incapable of making informed decisions, uncaring and ignorant of how to engage with and motivate followers. Poor leaders deliver a toxic long-term legacy, which affects team members and followers, and ultimately, impacts the bottom line of the organisation, team or unit. The typical traits of poor leaders (Leviticus, 2017) include:

- Lack of communication;
- Tendency to micromanage;
- Unclear expectations;
- Intimidation and bullying; and
- Poor people skills.

Many of our appointed leaders would appear to exhibit such symptoms, causing untold damage to organisations. Management scholar Laurence J. Peter reasoned that people rise to their level of incompetence. Selection to higher office and new positions is often based on performance in previous assignments. The Peter Principle suggests that people rise, or get promoted, until they reach a job they cannot really manage, leaving many individuals to operate at their 'level of incompetence'.

"*In time, every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out* its duties." (Peter & Hull, 1969, p. 36)

Inevitably, therefore:

"*Work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence*". (ibid.)

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[1]*The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers, click here. Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.*

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The Peter Principle became an international best seller, selling well over a million copies. The original manuscript had been rejected by 30 publishers, before William Morrow & Company accepted it and printed a small run of 10,000 copies. The book made it into the New York Times best-seller list, selling over 200,000 copies in the first year. It has since been translated into 38 languages.

A generalised form of the Peter Principle asserts that anything that works will continue to be utilised in the exact same format, in increasingly more demanding contexts and applications, until it ultimately fails. The temptation is to develop a habit that keeps replicating exactly what has worked previously and impose it on new situations as they are encountered.

Ironically, Peter and Hull also noted that highly competent individuals may struggle to progress through the system.

"*In most hierarchies, super-competence is more objectionable than incompetence.*" (ibid.)

Peter and Hull duly warned that extremely skilled and productive employees often face criticism, and are fired if they don't start performing worse as their presence '*disrupts and therefore violates the first commandment of hierarchical life: the hierarchy must be preserved.*'

A crisis of leadership

In an increasingly uncertain world, leaders are called upon to deliver both hope and change. When there is a need for a clear direction, followers turn to their leaders for the courage to make the right decision and the inspiration and assurance that allow followers to believe.

Many of the leaders we encounter in all spheres of life place their desire to be right above the wish to achieve the right outcome. Ego boosts, quests for power and the thirst for greed are often confused with leadership.

As a result, many followers, citizens and workers remain concerned by the apparent lack of leadership skills. The World Economic Forum identified lack of leadership as one of the major global challenges facing the world in 2015, and commissioned a survey to investigate further. A staggering 86% of respondents worldwide agreed that there is currently a global leadership crisis.

The figures divided by region support the global perception of the problem, with respondents acknowledging a leadership crisis divided by continent and region as follows:

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Region	Recognising a global crisis
Asia	83%
Europe	85%
Latin America	84%
Middle East & North Africa	85%
North America	92%
Sub-Saharan Africa	92%

It appears that if there is one thing we all agree upon, regardless of location, is that leaders are unable to perform as needed.

When asked what skills would be needed to win back their confidence, respondents identified a set of virtues, including:

- A global interdisciplinary perspective
- Long-term, empirical planning
- Strong communication skills
- A prioritisation of social justice and well-being over financial growth
- Empathy
- Courage
- Morality, and
- A collaborative nature

It is no longer enough to be inspirational. Leaders are expected to engage different stakeholder groups, listen, mediate and include the opinions of diverse constituencies before making their decisions.

Successful leaders of the future are expected to be good at execution, team building and delegation, combined with honing a positive and reassuring attitude in the face of growing uncertainty and adversity.

Leadership matters

US Professor Warren Bennis is widely recognised as a pioneer of the leadership movement. Indeed, the financial Times referred to him in 2000 as '*the professor who established leadership as a respectable academic field*.' In August 2007, Business Week ranked Bennis as one of the top ten thought leaders in business.

Professor Bennis and Professor Bert Nanus wrote the first book dedicated to leadership. *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge* was released in 1985 providing an insightful and much needed guide to the area of leadership. The book is based on a series of interviews with successful leaders. The original edition proved a success, and the book was translated into 21 languages.

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The book has evolved over time. It might be instructive therefore to conduct a brief guided tour through the three different editions, paying particular attention to the changes in emphasis.

The first edition (1985) predates most other writing in the area of leadership. It identifies a tendency to replace management with leadership as people do not want to get managed, but would prefer to be led. Leaders were not 'incrementalists'; they were looking to create new ideas, new policies and new methodologies. The authors identified four major strategies that emerged from their research, that all 90 of their subjects embodied:

- **Attention through vision**, is the creation of focus which matches the leaders' agenda and grabs followers
- **Meaning through communication**, is used to capture imagination and create alignment
- **Trust through positioning,** is used to maintain organisational integrity
- **The deployment of self,** is essential to ensuring that leaders manage themselves. Without it, leaders will do more harm than good as 'like incompetent physicians, incompetent managers can make people sicker and less vital' (ibid., p. 58)

The second edition (Bennis & Nanus, 1997) offers new emphases. In particular, upon reflection, the authors felt that the following points were important:

- Leadership is about character and character is a continuously evolving thing.
- To keep organisations competitive, leaders must be instrumental in creating a social architecture capable of generating intellectual capital
- Strong determination to achieve a goal, or realise a vision must be a conviction or even a passion
- The capacity to generate and sustain trust is the central ingredient in leadership
- True leaders have an uncanny way of enrolling people in their vision through their optimism
- Leaders have a bias towards action that results in success. It comes from their capacity to translate vision and purpose into reality

More crucially, the book identifies a need to refresh and update leadership thinking as millions of new leaders will need to come on board and play a part in driving new achievements. Gazing into the future, the authors conclude that the leaders who succeed most, will be those who are able to:

1. Set direction during turbulent times
2. Manage change whilst still providing exceptional customer service and quality
3. Attract resources and forge new alliances to accommodate new constituencies
4. Harness diversity on a global scale
5. Inspire a sense of optimism, enthusiasm, and commitment among their followers
6. Be a leader of leaders, especially regarding knowledge workers.

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The final update of the book took place with the publication of the third edition in 2003, enabling the authors to reflect on 20 years of development in leadership. In summarising the achievements of the book over that period, the authors identified five key contributions to leadership:

1. **Distinguishing leadership from management**: Leaders serve a different organisational purpose from managers and have a unique perspective and responsibility. The distinction that 'managers do things right while leaders do the right thing' had been widely accepted and quoted.

2. **Empowerment**: empowerment replaces power and control, enabling concepts such as collaborative leadership and servant leadership.

3. **Vision**: A clearly articulated vision, or a strong sense of direction, focuses the attention: Ultimately, a widely shared vision enables organisations to succeed.

4. **Trust**: Trustworthiness is a vital characteristic of successful leadership, whilst the lack thereof has proven to be a key ingredient in organisational failures, scandals and disasters

5. **Management of meaning**: Leaders play a key part in shaping meaning and communicating the culture. Indeed, they have primary responsibility for articulating organisational values, interpreting reality, framing and mobilising meaning, and creating the necessary symbols and role models to communicate a coherent image of the principles that should guide organisational behaviour.

'*In a world that is becoming increasingly complex, interdependent, and vulnerable to disruption, few things may be more important than the quality and credibility of leaders who set worthwhile agendas, mobilize the necessary resources and empower others to act in the best interests of their organizations and the larger society*'. (Bennis & Nanus, 2003; p. iii)

Seeking agility in leaders

Many of the challenges identified by Bennis & Nanus remain valid. Meanwhile, new ones continue to come to the fore. Turbulent times, new technologies and revolutionary platforms, speedier resolution, increased global connectedness, and wider dependence and impacts of supply and delivery chains require new leaders capable of adapting, changing and making ever more critical and demanding decisions at an increasingly faster pace.

There is a clear need for fresh thinking around leadership to address such contemporary challenges. This month's column by Ron Meyer and Ronald Mejers offers just that. The contribution draws on their recently released book *Leadership agility: Developing your repertoire of leadership styles* published by Routledge. Ron and Ronald's work stems from the recognition that leadership is about influencing others to move in a certain preferred direction and there are many ways of achieving such influence.

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Recognising that leaders require a more extensive playbook for tackling demanding new contexts Ron and Ronald simply set about writing one that will offer the variety and resilience for leaders in changing contexts.

John P. Kotter observed that '*because management deals mostly with the status quo and leadership deals mostly with change, in the next century we are going to have to try to become much more skilled at creating leaders*'. Ron and Ronald acknowledge the need for creating agile leaders. Agile leaders are flexible, adaptable and responsive and are therefore adept at switching between behaviours, acquiring new behaviours and are acutely aware of the situation faced and therefore able to rapidly react and take appropriate action. Not following a recipe, requires greater familiarity with the range of options and potential approaches to enacting leadership and the authors do a wonderful job in introducing an extensive variety of approaches and perspectives. Their vision of agility revolves around leaders who '*have the capacity to flexibly switch between leadership styles, and adaptively master new ones, in rapid response to the specific needs of the people and situation they want to influence.*' (Meyer & mijers, 2017, pp. xvi-xvii)

Agility is permeating most aspects of organisations, forcing leaders to respond to changing situations and contexts. Situational leadership theories always emphasised the need for contextual recognition and alignment. Ron and Ronald recognise that the situational pressures on leaders have become more pressing and exponentially more complex. They acknowledge that leaders need to respond by making a step change in their capacity to become more agile and responsive.

Ron and Ronald identify new trends towards greater organisational agility; a need for greater organisational diversity; a requirement for increased employee empowerment; and, greater career diversity. The new trends make it impossible for leaders to rigidly hold on to any particular leadership style and approach. Moreover, they make it unlikely that the same approach can be sustained indefinitely over the long-term horizon. The focus on agility in leadership makes it possible to develop a wider repertoire of styles and approaches that can be customised and contextualised to deliver a better targeted and more effective range of responses.

Ron and Ronald are thus able to make an important contribution to the on-going development of leadership scholarship. Their focus on ten leadership paired opposites, through identified paradoxes forces prospective and existing leaders to engage with the different dimensions and perspectives and gain a richer understanding of the range of potential approaches. It also chimes with the view of Warren Bennis that '*Leaders must encourage their organizations to dance to forms of music yet to be heard.*'

The early identification of default styles of leadership as advocated in *Leadership Agility* can subsequently be contrasted with shifting priorities and needs encouraging the recognition of the plurality and diversity of response styles. Rather than settling on providing recipes and guidelines, Ron and Ronald encourage the development of responsible, informed and competent leaders, ready to face the demanding challenges of modern environments and contexts. In doing so they continue the tradition of

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stretching leaders to be the best they can and give followers a chance to be guided and supported by the leaders that they deserve.

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI, SMIEEE, SFHEA is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 "movers and shapers" in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine's "Academic of the Year" for his contribution in "integrating and weaving academic work with practice". Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London.

Professor Dalcher has written over 200 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice,* an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of two book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of a companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond.

Darren is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, a Senior Member of the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, and the British Academy of Management. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an academic advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.

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