



A. C. MACRIS CONSULTANTS

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HIGHLIGHTS

A poll of 150 executives from the nation's 1000 largest companies ranked Leadership skills as most essential (47%) and Communication skills as second at 35%.

The more we read about the 'state' of leadership, the more we find there to be a real world deficit in leadership. The 'state' of leadership can mean many different things, but surveys reveal the need for a higher level of leadership capability. The deficit is where the gap between where the overall level of leadership presently appears to be at and the level at which people believe it should be; hence the term leadership deficit.

The major point that this article is challenging is that the 'how to' leadership gurus and books typically purport leadership tips, good practice and do as I say advice with the expectation of their readers, that if they mimic these guidelines, will improve their own leadership abilities. Reality is quite different. While we typically do not believe in just stirring the pot to make problematic issues worse, it is important to highlight the fallacious nature of leadership development herein, and in future articles we advance a rather revolutionary approach to look at leadership.

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The Elixir of Leadership - A Misconception

by
A. C. Macris

When we plunge into the organizational literature on leadership we quickly become lost in the labyrinth: there are endless definitions, countless articles and never-ending polemics. As far as leadership studies go, it seems that more and more has been studied about less and less, to end up ironically with a group of researchers studying everything about nothing. It prompted one wit to say recently that reading the current world literature on leadership is rather like going through the Parisian telephone directory while trying to read it in Chinese.....It is unfortunate, however, that the popularity of leadership research has not been equalled by its relevance..... Paragraph excerpted from the 1994 Academy of Management Executive Vol. 8 No. 3 article titled *The Leadership Mystique* by Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries.

The World of Leadership

As we are all painfully aware, just what the world needs is another article on Leadership. But why are people so obsessed with leadership? Harvard Business Review magazine dedicates whole issues to leadership. *Fast Company Magazine* was founded on a single premise: a global revolution was changing business, and business was changing the world. Discarding the old rules of business, *Fast Company* set out to chronicle how changing companies create and compete, to highlight new business practices, and to showcase the teams and individuals who are inventing the future and reinventing business. Rarely does an issue of *Fast Company* not include the topic of leadership, in addition to issues that focus on the topic in their entirety. As an example, in one of the most recent issues of *Fast Company*, the article on leadership refers to "Leadership Secrets" and spells out five things to do to be an effective leader. Still, the more we read about the 'state' of leadership, we find there to be a real world deficit in leadership. [see paragraph at the end of the article] I understand that these are very broad and general comments. The 'state' of leadership can mean many different things, but surveys reveal the need for a higher level of leadership capability. The deficit is where the gap between where the overall level of leadership presently appears to be at and the level at which people believe it should be; hence the term leadership deficit. Consider all the leadership seminars, workshops and courses being offered each and every day. Would companies be sending their leaders if they did not believe there was a leadership deficit?

Let me start with a simplistic example. Conduct a title search on Amazon.com using the word 'leadership.' You will find countless titles telling the reader how to be a leader. The authors include such notables as Rudolph Giuliani, John Maxwell, Barry Posner, etc. Let's look at the titles:

- Leadership 101- What every leader needs to know
- The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell
- The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership
- The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader – Becoming the person other will want to follow
- Total Leadership – The Essentials

....the only thing left is to bottle this elixir of leadership so potential leaders can drink of the mysterious potion, and abracadabra—magically you become a leader. We all know this is hardly true.

It goes on and on. These books offer the following: do as I suggest or as I have done and you, too, can be a leader. It is almost as if each title is like a magic potion – Based on these approaches to leadership, the only thing left is to bottle this elixir of leadership so potential leaders can drink of the mysterious potion, and abracadabra—magically you become a leader. We all know this is hardly true.

I found an article in CIO magazine's Leading Questions, monthly column about leadership and management issues written by Senior Editor Edward Prewitt. The article caught my attention for obvious reasons. Mr. Prewitt writes: "Much leadership advice is anecdotal and situational, based on someone's experiences. No matter how wise the author may be in drawing lessons, his experiences might not be relevant to you. If you're a CIO trying to figure out how to lead in a confusing and tense environment, what advice do you believe, what tactics do you try out? The same problem extends to choosing a consultant; what managerial philosophy (if any) do they use as a guide, and how do you know that it's right for your situation and your organization?"

There's no easy answer, no application wizard that will reveal your one true leadership model (and beware of anyone who promises one). You have to draw on your

experience, education and wisdom to figure out what works. And even then there's no guarantee. A teaching that has worked for me comes from John Kotter of Harvard Business School: leadership and management are very different animals. This observation may seem commonplace today, but it was a eureka moment in 1990 when Kotter published *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management*. And it strikes me that many CIOs, because of the nature of their role, could use a refresher on this key point. *Leadership* is about change and movement — perceiving the need for a new direction, figuring out where the organization needs to go, formulating a strategy to get there and motivating employees to make it happen.

Management is a matter of consistency and order — setting goals, laying out specific plans and budgets, organizing and staffing with qualified people, and controlling deviations (a.k.a. solving problems)."

Academia v Practitioner

Let's look at another perspective. The above represents what I might refer to as the secular side of this issue. There is side from academia also. To quote a few academics on the topic of leadership, "...the paucity of research....on leadership..." as well as comments like, "Unfortunately existing leadership research is mostly unintegrated with organizational theory, and leadership is severed from the organizational processes." These are examples that reinforce the need for a deeper look into the state of leadership development and an examination of the existing thinking on leadership. Another gap exists between the academics and the practitioners. As our lead-in paragraph states, "...more and more has been studied about less and less, to end up ironically with a group of researchers studying everything about nothing." Conversely, academics perceive management consultants as being self-serving opportunists. Why is do they feel like this? Is it because there is no common leadership framework to work together on? Is there a disconnect between academic/research studies and the real world that seems to be experiencing a leadership deficit? Whatever the reason, it appears there needs to be a different leadership model that establishes a framework that both research can support and practitioners can translate into real world applications yielding outcomes that are more predictable.

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The Leader as an Individual

Most leadership articles, workshops, etc. look at the topic of leadership as an individual skill set or a set of characteristics of this nebulous population society considers leaders, particularly individuals who have been successful leaders. What does that mean to a person who is either in a leadership position, or aspires to such a position? Pick your poison, whom do you want to emulate? Which book or guru do you want to believe? So you pick one. Then what? At this point it is up to the reader as to what he or she will do with the guidance provided. Typically people attempt to extrapolate those aspects of the methodology or characteristics that may apply to their perception of their own situation. This brings up a whole range of other issues. Does the person who is extrapolating the information know enough to make the right assumptions and applications? Does the person know how to measure the outcomes of their actions? Is this whole thing of leadership taken on faith based on the author or the guru? This is where another myth of leadership comes into play - the notion of the "born leader." When all else fails and the gurus can not explain anymore the fall back position is even more ill characterized as a set of "born" abilities. So let us look back on all this – in short, the Elixir of Leadership. The premise? Drink and ye shall be blessed with knowledge and skill – all you need to do is know how to apply your newly gained insights and that, my friend, is up to you. If you are successful then you must be insightful, and if you are really successful you are designated as a "born leader."

When leadership development should begin

I want to include another perspective on leadership development. For those of you who have attended leadership workshops and seminars, etc. recall the cross-section of the population attending the session. Think about the average age of the attendees. It occurs to me that it seems to be a bit late in some of these people's careers to be teaching them about leadership. Our Spring 2001 issue of Update was titled Leadership in Band Class. In this article Jim Hilbie, the Mystic Middle School band teacher who was the primary author of that article, and I hoped to illustrate that the teaching leadership to students in the 5th through 8th grades is feasible and beneficial to their future development, whatever that might be. So what does this have to do with leadership seminars, business and industry? Just think about "dearth of executive leadership" skills in industry and business. Now think about developing and nurturing leadership skills throughout a student's school career, might this "dearth of leadership skills" be minimized? Might the composition of those attending

leadership courses change, might the quality of leadership be enhanced earlier and leadership learning move to the next level?

Real world implications

I keep talking about a different leadership model. This article's primary purpose is to stimulate our reader's thinking and present what we see as some of the traditional issues affecting leadership and leadership development. We do not believe there is an elixir of leadership, but we do believe there is a better way. We will share our thoughts on an improved and innovative leadership model in future issues of UPDATE. But in closing this article there are a few more points that we want to suggest. It is relatively easy to be critical of almost anything, but much harder to be constructive and offer positive input to improve the existing condition. Therefore, to skip forward and examine the opportunities a new more rigorous view and model of leadership affords us, we must look at the benefits that can be gained. When we write about our new thinking on leadership, we will demonstrate that this model will:

- De-mystify leadership
- Allow for better selection of leaders
- Provide a framework for leadership training and development
- Establish a forum for changing the way we look at leadership
- Apply to the widest range of organizations from military to business/industry to religious and non- profits
- Allow for the exploitation of experience, competencies and attributes, but channels them appropriately, thereby adding assurances of leadership effectiveness and success
- Eliminate the interpolation of leadership guidelines and 'How-to' leadership books to one's own situation

Sounds like a tall order, and while it is quite straightforward, there is much work to be done. One of the reasons for not just throwing out the skeleton of the model is that we want to bridge the gap between academia and the real world. We want to be certain that we are on a solid research footing, but also be able to convert the esoteric to things real people can do to achieve real results.

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Read any business magazine, trade journal professional journal, newsletter and the topic of leadership will usually be in the forefront. As examples, the March-April 2001 issue of Corporate University Review in the first paragraph of an article titled *Knowledge Management for Leadership Development* states: "Arguably the most compelling challenge facing organizations entering the new millennium is not general shortage of talent. It is the dearth of executive leadership." A June 2001 *Fast Company* article titled, *Is anyone IN CHARGE*, is written by a futurist Harlan Cleveland (83 years old). He says, "No grandpa at the helm possesses enough knowledge to make the organization run efficiently. Increased complexity requires that people from all levels of the organization have the freedom to think for themselves – not just obey orders. More than ever, executive leadership means that you have to consult the group and then point the way."



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