

The leadership phenomenon's puzzles and problems

Robert J. Allio

Robert J. Allio, an *S&L* contributing editor, is the author of numerous books and articles on leadership, including "Leaders and leadership—many theories, but what advice is reliable?" which continues to be a reader favorite.[1] A principal of Allio Associates, a strategy consultancy located in Providence, RI (rallio@mac.com), he is an Adjunct Professor at Brown University.

Leadership and leaders—these have been the trending topics in management literature for the past 20 years or more. Yet despite the efforts of our best scholars from business schools and from the fields of sociology, psychology, political science and economics, we still lack clarity on how leadership works and how to produce good leaders. We continue to valorize leaders, although our preferred paradigms often fail us as long-term results are charted. When that happens we replace Plato's philosopher-king with Carlyle's Great Man and then with Greenleaf's servant leader and so on. More recently many observers have exalted the authentic transformational leader, which cynics suggest is a mythical species.

The leadership phenomenon itself is still a mystery. We cannot observe it directly, but we claim to observe its effects—although we can't agree on a metric for leader competence. And theories about how to lead effectively? They multiply like meerkats. Unfortunately, all of the theories are unproven—we lack the empirical data to test their validity in a variety of situations. And as philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has famously noted, we have no theory that helps us pick the best theory.[2]

We refrain from identifying inept leaders, preferring usually to assign corporate failure to externalities like technological innovation or economic turbulence or bad luck. Conversely, we easily fall prey to the fundamental attribution error: assigning corporate success to the heroic leader, when evidence suggests that only a small fraction of corporate performance can be correlated with the leader. Furthermore, our judgments are fickle. The luster of today's corporate hero often fades quickly with time—as examples, consider how history is reassessing the careers of CEOs Jack Welch and Jeffrey Immelt of General Electric.

We experience a continuing drought in the development of leaders who are both effective and ethical. No matter that business schools and consultants offer aspiring leaders inoculations of charisma, presence, competence, and wisdom. Sometimes they caution that the process may take 12-18 months, but others claim that a month or a week of training will suffice. Such temerity. Indeed, more than one observer has indicted the entire leadership industry as a fraud perpetrated on the gullible consumer.[3] Given the failing of the training industry some see merit in a do-it-yourself approach.[4]

Do good leaders require some preternatural genetic quality? Or can we all learn to be effective leaders through proper education, training and development? And what about exceptional leaders? Some scholars have argued that they all demonstrate pathology such as narcissism, paranoia or obsessive-compulsive behavior. Neuroscientist Savvas Papacostas contends persuasively that the best leaders inevitably display personality disorders.[5] And



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management scholar Clive Boddy has long maintained that psychopathy in the corporate suite is rampant.^[6]

So we are plagued with bad leaders, and we don’t have much success in producing good leaders. We struggle to develop a cogent theory of leadership, we underestimate the critical role of followers, and we undervalue the importance of understanding context. It’s altogether a depressing muddle, and we may be in the winter of despair.

To alleviate feelings of despond over the current failures of leadership, I suggest two potential remedies in this issue, my interview with Harvard leadership authority Barbara Kellerman and the article “Evaluating potential transformational leaders: weighing charisma vs. credibility.”

Notes

1. “Leaders and leadership—many theories, but what advice is reliable?,” *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 41 No. 1, 2012.
2. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago, 1962.
3. Brian Leavy, “Interview: Jerrey Pfeer: Stop selling leadership malarkey,” *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2016.
4. Robert J. Allio, “Becoming a leader,” *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2018.
5. Savas Papacostas, *Madness and Leadership*, Elgar, 2015.
6. Boddy, C.R., “The dark side of management decisions: organisational psychopaths,” *Management Decision*, Vol. 44, No. 10, 2006.

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