



Leadership: the magic formula for success

Heather Maitland explores leadership: what is it and can it be learned?

‘Do not command. Do not control. Do not force your needs and insights into the foreground.’

This advice to leaders is two and a half thousand years old – and, with 20,557 titles available on Amazon, leadership is still a hot topic.¹ In 2004, business spent \$50 billion on leadership development.² It’s easy to see why. Leaders are our only hope of salvation in a crisis; so, the magic formula for success is cheap at any price. But is it all a con?

For a start, there is little agreement about what leadership is. Definitions are often contradictory: for example, some argue that leadership is the same as authority, while others insist that is management and that leadership is about exerting influence regardless of the authority that comes with position, rank or role.³ Many researchers and commentators don’t even bother with definitions. Joseph Rost looked at 587 academic articles with leadership in their titles and almost two-thirds avoided defining their subject.⁴ It has even been argued that leadership is a myth created to ensure the preservation of the status quo as, when things go pear-shaped, we can blame poor leadership rather than bad social systems and structures.⁵

There is a tendency to mix up management and leadership: for example, Cary Cooper merges leadership with management style throughout an extensive introduction to the topic.⁶ But differentiating the two can be distinctly dodgy. According to Joseph Rost, we see people practising leadership as ‘the good guys in the white hats’ and managers as the ‘bad guys in the black hats’ who

are making a mess of leadership.⁷ This means that leadership becomes anything that results in excellence and management any process that doesn’t. The problem is that no one can agree how to measure excellence.⁸

There is also disagreement about whether leadership is about who you are or what you do. We are fascinated by the rich and powerful: a lot of research tries to work out why they are rich and powerful by listing personality traits and behaviours. The problem is that our personalities are fixed when we are very young and learning a set of competencies doesn’t make us competent.⁹

The result of all this confusion is that discussion of leadership can descend into empty rhetoric: ‘The problem with many organisations, and especially ones that are failing, is that they tend to be over-managed and under-led. [...] Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing.’¹⁰

Until the late 1980s, schools were managed. Now they are led. There’s even a National College for School Leadership. Tony Bush believes that this is not just a semantic shift. He agrees with those who argue that, unlike management, leadership is about influence, not authority. Anyone in any position can be a leader as long as they can persuade people to accept their vision. This is often known as transformational leadership: a leader who has shown themselves as likeable, trustworthy and knowledgeable creates and communicates an inspiring vision of the future, which promises to fulfil a set of hopes and aspirations they have in common with their followers.¹¹

In contrast, management is about coercion: people do what the manager wants because they want to gain reward, avoid punishment or seek to fulfil a clear set of contractual obligations, written or unwritten.¹² But leadership can be about coercion too. Transactional leadership involves the leader setting objectives for the follower and monitoring outcomes with reward and punishment as the motivation.

But this form of leadership only works where there is a clear hierarchy, in which a job title gives someone power over subordinates. Many commentators agree that globalisation, technology and outsourcing are changing the nature of business.¹³ Managers can no longer rely on authority to get things done. To be leaders, they need to learn the political strategies of bargaining, building coalitions and finding a common agenda among conflicting interests. They need to understand the importance of values, emotions and the symbols that give meaning to groups of people working collectively.¹⁴

Although this idea of leadership outside the hierarchy has gained currency in the education context, is it applicable to the arts sector?¹⁵ The debate about whether management and leadership competencies are generic is still running. Most of the education sector, however, now believes that their particular purpose and values – to promote effective teaching and learning – needs a sector-specific approach.

In the UK cultural sector, more often than not we focus on a single artistic leader rather than on the collective

creative processes common in other cultures. Researchers have focused on this idea of the artistic leader, often choosing to explore how orchestras work because they are a good example of a diverse group of people who need to accomplish interdependent tasks. A study of 300 members of 18 German orchestras with professional conductors showed that transactional leadership styles where the conductor looked for mistakes in a reward/punishment relationship with members and transformational leadership styles based on supporting members to achieve an inspiring vision both had a positive effect on achieving high artistic quality. Transactional styles were only slightly less likely to inspire positive emotions in orchestra members.

So, artistic leaders need to adopt different styles in different circumstances. Over the past decade, this idea has gained currency outside the arts, too. Instead of seeking a single magic formula for good leadership, discussion is now around full-range leadership, in which the only bad form of leadership is a refusal to lead.¹⁶ ●



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