

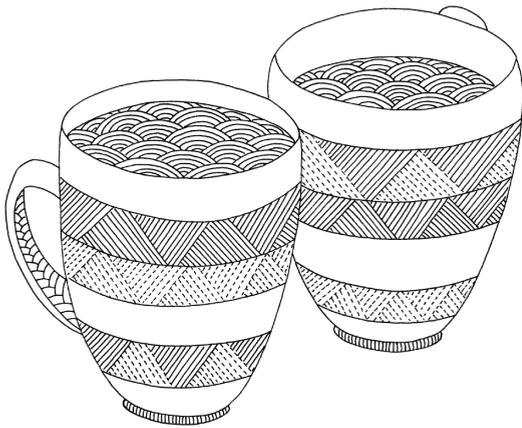
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What Leadership Is, and Where It Happens



Let's start with the real secret of leadership: it happens all the time, almost anywhere you look, and it's frankly not that difficult.

Disappointed? Perhaps you were expecting something a little more ... well, challenging? That's not surprising, because for the last, oh, three millennia – in fact, since an unknown *Homo erectus* first did a Banksy on a cavern wall – we've been pretty much preoccupied as a society with the idea of heroic leadership. You know, the Neanderthal who slays the sabre-toothed tiger, Odysseus, Napoleon, the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke, Captain Sully (see Chapter 4), Bobby Moore – all that good stuff.

Which is fine. It makes for good reading and an endless source of uplifting quotes (great for use in motivational posters and filling all that white space left over on your team-building PowerPoint slide).

The problem is that we've become so accustomed to leadership being defined as heroic by journalists (or historians) looking for a good story, we have lost the ability to see true leadership for what it really is: an almost always un-glorious, headline-free, mundane activity that takes

place every minute of every day in uncountable different (albeit prosaic) ways.

Like a sports-loving couch potato who has become so addicted to YouTube highlights, instant replays and canned post-game synopses that he can no longer bear the monotony of actually attending (let alone watching) a complete, unedited, in-the-raw football game, so we've become accustomed to the media's Hollywood-style version of leadership to such a degree that we have lost our capacity for recognising genuine leadership as it happens around us every day in real life. And when we do that, things start to change.

Compare and Contrast

Here's an example of what I mean. On the day I wrote this chapter, the first five 'leadership' stories I encountered during my usual, fairly random, media consumption were as follows:

- A profile of a 46-year-old 'whizz-kid' CEO from a hip, funky, brand-name organisation who has redefined the concept of leadership in his company based on, wait for it, his favourite sports coaching heroes.
- A politician running a not-very-tight race for office is praised for showing leadership by taking a stand on a policy that directly contradicts her party's line.
- An entire continent is castigated for a lack of leadership as the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (launched in October 2006 to support good governance and great leadership in Africa) announced that, for the fourth time in seven years, they would not be awarding their prize to any African leader.

- The CIO of a Fortune 500 company tells a leadership conference that he 'wakes up every morning filled with excitement about what [my] team of more than 1,200 employees aims to do for the day and with a drive to apply [my] knowledge to [my] best potential'.
- An academic who has taken a sabbatical to study the challenges of leadership in modern society reports that he has identified them to be 'Technology and Information', 'Resilience', 'Well-Being', 'Disruptive Innovation' and something he calls 'Environmental Scanning'.

All well and good, so far as they go – but notice how all of these stories follow the same narrative arc: the assumption that leadership must somehow be, however vaguely, connected to wisdom, or bravery, or celebrity, or scale, or great achievement – something, anything, that adds an heroic tinge. It's hard to feel that any of these well-reported stories have any real relevance to how most of us spend our time, day to day, in the real world.

Now let me share with you the first five actual acts of leadership I encountered on the same day. Notice these aren't potted stories with a moral or a point, or halo-inducing profiles, or tales of derring-do, they're just honest-to-goodness, real-world acts of leadership:

- Our team here at my business growth consultancy had to head out at 8.30am for a client meeting. My wife rose before dawn to get her gym visit in early, so our shared car would be available for my team to use on time.
- On an afternoon conference call, a colleague volunteered to drop 10 of his slides from a presentation we would be presenting the next day that was overcomplicated and running long.

- During a coaching call, a client made a commitment to me that for one week she would not interrupt others during her team's discussions and would allow her colleagues to fully finish their thoughts before expressing her own opinion.
- During a meeting at a local coffee shop, I watched as a barista stopped cleaning table tops and jumped in to assist a colleague when the line became lengthy.
- The woman who dog-sits my pooches when I'm travelling emailed to remind me she'd be picking the dogs up at 9am the next morning, and asked if I needed her to grab some dog food from the store, as she'd noticed during her last visit that it was running low.

Notice a difference between the media-reported stories and the real-world acts of leadership? Storytelling requires a narrative arc, and reporting on leadership is no different – there needs to be a hero, or a villain, or a winner, or a loser (or a video of a cute cat, at the very least). Fair enough, magazines and newspapers need to sell copies, websites need visitors, and none of them will garner much interest with stories like 'Woman Returns Car to Husband at 8.15am'.

Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against heroic leadership. In fact, because of my job (I coach senior executives) I'm in a privileged position and get to see more of it than most people. I'm a sucker for heroic acts of leadership, and watching people do incredible things under stress or navigate themselves and others through difficult situations regularly reduces me to a blubbering mess.

But that doesn't mean we should take the 'hero-as-leader' template as our only, or even our main, model of leadership. Real-world leadership is very, very different from all that the media would have us believe.

Real-world leadership is most typically understated – often to the point of going unseen by most people. Real-world leadership is most often prosaic, mundane, unspectacular.

In fact, if you glanced casually through the examples of real-world leadership I gave earlier, you probably wrinkled your brow and wondered how they could be defined as acts of leadership at all. What on earth elevates the making of coffee for a waiting line of customers to the level of leadership – isn't that just someone doing their job? Bringing a car back on time for someone else to use it? Isn't that just a common act of courtesy? And the executive who decided to try buttoning her lip and let others speak for a change – she's surely just trying to be less of a jerk, no?

What Leadership Is

Well, it depends, of course, on how we define 'leadership'. If 'heroic' leadership is a valid concept, but gives us the wrong (i.e. too narrow) perspective on what 'everyday' leadership is, what then should our definition of leadership be?

Merriam-Webster, the popular online dictionary, provides us with two possible definitions, one only a little more useful than the other:

- **The state or position of being a leader** (well, duh); and/or
- **The action of leading a group of people or an organisation**

A simple web search yields equally unhelpful generalisations about leaders and leadership, even from some of the more revered practitioners of the leadership arts:

- ‘someone who has followers’ – Peter Drucker (a personal hero of mine)
- ‘someone who has influence’ – John Maxwell
- ‘those who empower others’ – Bill Gates
- ‘the capacity to translate vision into reality’ – Warren Bennis

All very broad. And frankly unhelpful.

Here’s my take – one which I’ve honed from 35 years of working with leaders (heroic and otherwise), and from engaging in occasional acts of leadership myself – which we’ll use as a working definition for the rest of this book:

Leadership is helping any group of two or more people achieve their common goals.

Not very complicated, I admit, but it’s a robust definition that has served me and the people and organisations I work with well over the years.

Let’s break it down a little and consider the implications of defining leadership this way.

Leadership shows up in groups or teams

It’s a given that leadership implies follower-ship (you aren’t leading if no one follows). So leadership isn’t a self-contained, individual act – it only has validity when others are involved.

Those groups or teams can be very small

At a minimum, you need only be one of a ‘group’ of two people to lead. Leadership, therefore, happens not just in large organisations, but also in the smallest of groups: in relationships, with friends, even (as we shall see later) in what may seem like the most informal and transient of water-cooler interactions.

Leadership can happen in an instant

While many acts of leadership are the result of considerable thought and planning, there’s no knowing when an act of leadership can or will occur. If you’re with one other person (or five, or 20, or 1,000) and you do or say something that helps that group move closer to a common goal, that’s an act of leadership. A spur-of-the-moment decision made on the fly stands equally as an act of leadership with an agonising decision made only after sleepless nights and much soul-searching.

Leadership isn’t a permanent state

In a group or team, I might do something that is an act of leadership in one moment, and you might follow it with another. Joan over there might contribute another act of leadership later on. It’s important to see that even when a group or team has formally designated ‘leaders’ (a project management team, say, or an executive board), those ‘recognised’ leaders don’t have a monopoly over acts of leadership. (In fact, as we’ll see in a later chapter, this mindset – that only formally accepted leaders can or should lead – is highly dysfunctional and produces poor-quality teams.)

Leadership happens both formally and informally

Leadership doesn’t only occur in formal situations like board meetings, on the sports field or in a war room. Groups of two or more people can coalesce in an instant around short- or medium-term objectives. Showing leadership is equally possible whether you’re at a three-day strategic retreat fighting for the survival of your business, or chatting in the cafeteria with a colleague about how to ship a sample product to Beijing.

What Leadership Is Not

Finally in this first chapter, it's important for us to get out of the way some of the more dangerous myths about what's involved in being a leader.

Dangerous? I guess 'debilitating' would be a better word. Unless you're running a major military operation, no one's life is endangered when leadership is portrayed as something it isn't, but many people are dissuaded on a daily basis from engaging in acts of leadership because they've been sold a notion of what it is to be a leader that's unrealistic and intimidating.

Leadership isn't about charisma

Let's start with the most glaring of category errors in thinking about leadership – the notion that leaders are charismatic and that leadership is glamorous.

I've met (and worked for) many charismatic leaders in my time, some of whom you'd know by name and many you wouldn't. But for every charismatic leader who has crossed my path, I've met and worked with hundreds more who couldn't possibly be described that way.

Charisma, if you have it, can be a great tool for a leader to wield (it's equally dangerous if used wrongly, of course) – but it's not a prerequisite. Nor is it necessary to be a wonderful communicator, or a fantastic motivator or a savant who reads people and understands their motives. All of these qualities are helpful to have, but just as possessing any or all of these characteristics doesn't automatically make you a leader, so not having them doesn't preclude you from engaging in acts of leadership.

Leadership isn't about genius

Leaders sometimes come up with truly remarkable ideas. When they do, they get written about and lauded (sometimes, rightly so). But leadership isn't all about brilliant ideas and acts of genius. Sometimes, leadership is the opposite: eschewing the highly creative, knock-it-out-of-the-park blue-sky idea for the mundane; choosing between not very risky alternatives; or, on occasion, simply making a statement of the bleeding obvious.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, if you have an IQ that upgrades you to platinum status at MENSA, that's fine, and you will certainly find many opportunities as a leader to exercise it – but genius isn't the price of entry to leadership. There are very many exceptionally clever people who could never, in a month of Sundays, be thought of as effective leaders – most likely your old college professors included. Similarly, I know many, many people with non-stellar IQs who are consistently superb leaders.

Leadership isn't about position

By now it should be obvious that leadership has almost nothing to do with an individual's position on an org chart. While seniority in an organisation may be a lagging indicator that someone has leadership skills, it's by no means a guarantee of it, and many people who never rise to a position of prominence in an organisation consistently act as leaders nonetheless. We'll see more about the interplay between position and leadership in Chapter 3, 'How (and When) to Lead'.

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