

Exploring the leadership that matters

by La Redazione

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“We need authentic leaders who are committed to stewardship of their assets and to making a difference in the lives of the people they serve”

Bill George

1. Introduction

For many decades now there has been a lot interest in what might be the “best” way of managing people and organisations. In fact, leaders are continuously being confronted by external and internal challenges and expectations that request their expertise, energies and efforts. The challenges are often in conflict with each other as organisations pull leaders to maximise profits whilst leaders also have to think of their followers and how to engage them. They are also confronted by ethical and moral issues in decisions they have to take.

Today’s leaders act in a global world that, according to Giddens (1998), influences social processes, institutions and encourages new forms of individualism. Sommerville (2000) emphasizes a Western culture characterized by autonomy and self determination, reminding us that we are living in a world of “intense individualism” where self-centeredness and the ‘I’ versus ‘us’ syndrome is often the rule of the day, thus militating against the values of the learning and inclusive community and the common good. A slavish commitment to intense individualism can rob us of a sense of what it means to be more fully engaged with our fellow human beings.

There seems to be a growing cynicism in the public arena concerning the honesty and the integrity of many contemporary leaders especially in business and politics. In fact it is not very uncommon to hear different stories about people who are willing to sacrifice their moral and ethical values for the sake of profits, productivity and position.

At a time of uncertainty and unprecedented complexity, ‘where have all the leaders gone?’ (Iacocca, 2007). The legendary CEO of Ford Motor Company asserts: «Am I the only guy in this country [the United States of America] who’s fed up with what’s happening? Where the hell is our outrage? » (ibid., 2007, p.3). An exclusive society and a competitive system have contributed to build a framework that generates selfishness, careerism and instills unfair competition within organizations.

We need to place principles, values and authentic actions at the centre of our discourse. We need to come up with new models of leadership that would be suitable to meet the challenges of today’s organizations. The examples of organizations exhibiting unethical behaviour has caused businesses to reexamine their strategic direction, helping them learn that a leadership that is based on moral and authentic foundations does not necessarily imply less profitability. Far from it. The growing public outcry demanding ethical and authentic leadership has led various companies to take a deep look into the way they operate both internally and externally ([George, 2003](#)). The future is looking somewhat brighter.

2. Which leadership do we deserve ?

We need leaders who can act as artists, renew old ways of doing things, act and instill new challenges within organizations. The strength of every leader is to inspire, create, strengthen, encourage and stand out from the scene. Away from the applause, the great leaders recognize that their greatest responsibility is to help create an environment where each individual can grow and fulfill his/her potential. Leadership is about relationship (Hoerr, 2005).

One of the greatest achievements for a leader is to put a strong sense of devotion, service and commitment to the goals of the organization and those who contribute to its success. It is necessary to become authentic and credible in the eyes and the hearts of the followers, because it is this attitude that generates the trust that transforms relationships. For as Maxwell points out «Trust is the foundation of leadership» (1998, p. 65). When employees perceive their supervisors as being consistent between words and actions, they are more likely to be engaged in their work. As Confucius had said: “ People will hear what one says and observe what one does”.

3. The need for authenticity

The capacity of being true to oneself is the principle that every leader should consider important. Becoming true to oneself is an pivotal precondition to being true to others. As Shakespeare explains: “To thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.” (Polonius, in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Act I, Scene 3*). Specifically the idea of being true to oneself has manifested itself in the form of authentic leadership which describes a leader as one who is «secure, confident, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and that gives priority to the development of employees by encouraging them to be leaders» (Luthans, Avolio, p.243).

Authenticity in leadership requires a radical change in the way we conceive much of the traditional way of thinking about leadership itself. In recent studies it has been argued that authentic leadership may affect positively employee attitude and behaviour as well as engagement, creativity, job commitment ([Walumbwa et al., 2008](#); [Walumbwa- Wang- Wang- Schaubroeck & Avolio, 2010](#)). Furthermore, it has been argued that leader integrity drives follower performance (Dan Shang Wang, Chia Chun Hsieh, 2013).

Yet, what does the research tell us? One of the biggest problems that organizations are facing, as revealed by the qualitative study of Plinio, Young and Lavery (2010) is the impoverishment of ethical behaviour and, in some ways, the lack of a morality in the work environment, which has progressively led to a collapse of confidence in the leadership and more generally, of the institutions. Darcy (2010) confirms the growing climate of scepticism, by a further study in which 66% of company employees doubt even the existence of ethical leadership. There is a «crisis of confidence» (ibid., p. 200). Addressing this will not be easy and as Evans (2007) points out, «The transformation begins with trust that is an essential link between the leader and the follower, vital to job satisfaction and loyalty, vital to followership » (p.135).

In the same vein, Copper and Sawaf warn about the high price one has to pay when an organization lacks respect and trust, «internal costs of mistrust lead to an inefficient tangle of hierarchies, communication, misperception, anger, guilt, cynicism, the consequent loss of time, energy and money. We feel compelled to write procedures or policies in great detail, often hundreds of pages, even for simple passages » (1997, p. 93). This lack of confidence can be attributed to what Frank (2002) calls the “dark side” of leadership, «attitudes that include the negative effects of power, privilege, deceit, inconsistency, irresponsibility and fake loyalty »(p.81). Unfortunately, over time, exposure to such behaviour leads to a progressive loss of confidence in the integrity of the leader from the follower.

This is the context in which we have to work in. Yukl (2006) summarizes how the ethical leader is one that promotes honesty, is reflected by his/her actions, his/her behaviour, values and beliefs. The author, however, acknowledges ethical leadership as a construct that is ambiguous and ambivalent. This includes several complex elements to be evaluated from a scientific point of view.

One should not underestimate the effect that this has on the genuineness of colleagues and collaborators. A life of authenticity reveals its strength in a context that shows hypocrisy and competition. A leader shows ethical integrity through their own words and actions, even in pursuing the right of dissent, creating an environment where the others are motivated and committed to follow him in pursuit of the good. Recently, Souba (2011), from a spiritual perspective, reflected on *'being a leader'* involved questioning and re-examining deeply held beliefs. The process of transformation involves change, and ethical leaders must be constantly transformed. The art of being a leader is defined as «awareness, commitment, integrity and authentic joy» (p. 14). Souba argues that an ethical leader is 'joyful' during difficult times. This is so because he remains true to himself. The author believes that ethical leadership is much more than a job, is more of a vocation, so ethical leadership is not defined by the task of making the right decision, but is based upon who you are.

Manz and Sims (1993) noted four shared strategic values of a successful ethical leadership within an organization: «to act with integrity, to be fair, to have fun, and to be socially responsible» (p. 15). These values are far from easy to establish or nurture and may be a constant challenge for those leaders who wish to be exemplary in nature. The authors are of the opinion that when leaders 'walk the talk' this leads to improved organizational morale.

4. First to serve, than to lead

«The great leader is seen as a servant first». This challenging quote, a fragment of the essay *The Servant*, captures the essence of the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998; Carroll, 2005). Through this oxymoron, that is the combination of two seemingly contradictory terms, servant and leader, Robert Greenleaf questioned the very nature of leadership with new categories. The old, authoritarian models are about the power connected to a role, not about the service. Whilst this latter concept of power can eventually lead to the productive results you want, it ignores the people, their aspirations and their talents.

Leadership without service is less substantial, more ego-driven and selfish, instead of being community centered, altruistic, and empathetic. The idea of Greenleaf years later continues to revolutionize the way we think about the workplace, overturning old organizational pyramids and placing employees at the summit. This idea, although not new, is still revolutionary and calls for more research and further considerations in the field of leadership studies. Describing the traits of the servant leaders, Soderquist (2006) highlights their capacity of believing in and feeling responsible for the development of others; their possibility to share not only the responsibility but also the recognition for success; their will to build relationships based on mutual respect and trust at all levels; their particular dedication to care about and look for ways to meet the needs of everyone they come in contact with.

If we believe in servant leadership as a way of life, than we must reflect on what it will take to nurture such a context where we can relate and grow together. In this respect servant-leadership becomes a guiding philosophy, an institutional model (Bezzina, 2009).

5. Insights for the future

The critical issue that we have tried to build in this paper and one that we will always face is, whose interests are we really looking at? Only when you reflect on your 'walk the talk' will you appreciate how you define leadership.

The models of leadership that will make a difference in this world will focus on three critical c's: connection, contact and character. Every organizations begins and ends with people. Every leadership approach begins with an inner journey. Individuals discover and claim their core values, develop a vision for how the world could be different, find their personal voice for expressing their vision. The challenge facing any leader is to transform institutions from ordinary organizations, by their mere instrumental value, focusing more on doing the right things, in real communities of practice. The assumption is that as this is a community based on authentic relationships between people, only the people can give life to the community. The new leader will put people at the centre of every action and must be able to create a dialogue between different parts of the organization, celebrating differences without imposing uniformity.

It is our opinion that leadership is a vocation. This implies loving what you get to do and get to care for and serving others. Think about the difference between an organization and leadership that pays attention to everyone rather than one that only caters to a few. Think about the impact your invitation to a meeting or gathering will have on members of an organization that are often left out or never involved in the decision making process. Think about the impact of telling these valued but overlooked employees that they work for an organization that supports their desire to come together, sit in a comfortable setting to meet their colleagues and discuss future developments. Think about why you chose to serve and lead. Think about how much you care. Think why you act in particular ways.

However, as noted by Bezzina (2013), this will not be easy as we need to explore the mindscapes and epistemologies that routinely cover our perceptions and create our realities. The world is not always what we think it is. This is because we get what we expect, and we expect what we believe to be true. One thing is certain, changing our minds about the leadership theories and practices that we currently believe in and that we currently use is difficult. But this change has to come first, followed by an honest commitment to climb out of the box that now imprisons us. This is the major challenge that awaits those wishing to make a difference for our country.

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