

Beyond heroic leadership

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- Leadership is often hampered by the assumption that it is concentrated in the hands of a single 'superhero' figure, with all responsibility for success – and failure – attributed to them.
- Organisations must move beyond 'heroic leadership' to embrace more collective, distributed forms of leadership.
- This will make them more effective in achieving desired outcomes.

Background

Organisations need effective leadership if they are to succeed. Good leadership develops strategies that address compelling needs, takes advantage of opportunities for change, and builds a coalition of willing followers prepared to work collectively in pursuit of common goals. It therefore seeks to embed a strong sense of the organisation's *purpose* (the reason for its existence, and the goals it is seeking to attain) at all levels.¹

The trouble with leadership

However, the practice of leadership has been hampered by two complementary problems. The first is a tendency to assume that leadership must be concentrated in the hands of a single 'superhero' figure. Research has shown that when a great deal of power is concentrated in the hands

¹ Van Knippenberg, D. (2019), '[Meaning-based leadership](#)'.

of individuals they become less empathic, more reluctant to seek advice, less inclined to take it when it is offered, more likely to show disrespect and incivility, and more inclined to develop hubris.² They make more unsafe decisions.

The second difficulty is a tendency to attribute all responsibility for success or failure to individual leaders – what has been termed 'the romance of leadership' effect.³ This exaggerates the responsibility of designated, directive and powerful leaders for delivering successful organisational outcomes. It also sets the stage for disillusionment on the part of followers, when practice inevitably falls short of the ideal.

There is a further challenge. Increasingly, we face 'wicked problems' – that is, complex problems that have little precedent, for which there is no obvious solution, where uncertainty is high and where the expertise required to address them is widely distributed.⁴ Examples include climate change, terrorism and the developing revolution in the nature of work caused by technological innovation. A 'command' approach may not be appropriate, since it is often unclear what should be done. Rather, the leadership challenge is to engage multiple voices to identify the best options available, and decide how to choose between them. Rapidly changing situations also require people to act independently far more often, rather than waiting for direction from above.

² Keltner, D. (2016), '[The Power Paradox: How we Gain and Lose Influence](#)'; Tourish, D. (2020), '[Towards an organizational theory of hubris: Symptoms, behaviours and social fields within finance and banking](#)'.

³ Meindl, J., S. Ehrlich, and J. Dukerich (1985), '[The romance of leadership](#)'.

⁴ Grint, K. (2005), '[Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of leadership](#)'.

Beyond 'heroic' leadership

It follows that using the leadership potential of multiple constituencies within organisations is likely to be crucial for success. This means that power and the capacity to make decisions need to be more widely distributed. A good example is the British Army, which has moved towards what it terms a 'Mission Command' approach to leadership. Justin Maciejewski, Director General of the National Army Museum explains it like this:

'... in the old world, you could say to someone, "Take and hold the bridge by midnight tonight." In the new world, you would say, "Our intention is to cross that river. To do that, I see you securing that bridge by midnight tonight. And the reason we want you to do that is because we want to put 20,000 soldiers on the far side of that river by the close of day tomorrow." If you imagine that philosophy being replicated across an organisation of 80,000 people at every level, it dramatically changes the performance. Everyone at every level is thinking, "What if it changes? How do I respond?">'⁵

This approach is often called 'distributed' or 'shared' leadership. It seeks to embed responsibility and insight at the point where the capacity to act is greatest. The NHS has embraced the fundamentals of this approach, through the NHS Leadership Academy.⁶ Such forms of leadership encourage *concertive action* – that is, the sharing of roles within teams, and the institutionalisation of collaboration among

⁵ Theunissen, R. and J. Maciejewski (October, 2019), '[How the British Army's operations went agile](#)'.

⁶ NHS Leadership Academy (2011), [The Leadership Framework](#), Warwick: NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement.

networks of people. It seeks to facilitate empowerment and engagement at multiple organisational levels.

People are encouraged to lead more frequently by *asking questions* rather than providing answers. It also means facilitating 'critical' upward communication, from those with less power to those with more power.⁷ Upward feedback facilitates shared leadership, and an enhanced willingness by leaders to act on employee suggestions. It also generates greater creativity and innovation. Techniques that can be used include greater use of formal upward feedback systems, reducing power and status differentials, and much more informal interaction between those at multiple levels of the organisation.

Problems with changing leadership

There are no panaceas. The following are among the major problems identified with moves to more collaborative models:⁸

- A persistent feeling that real power lies with outside policy makers, or senior organisational figures, thereby minimising people's scope to act.
- Continued reluctance on the part of specialists (for example, doctors) to step outside their traditional roles and embrace leadership responsibilities.
- People continuing to focus on their sectional interests rather than those of the wider organisation.
- A feeling that 'nobody' is really in charge.

What next?

⁷ Tourish, D. (2005), '[Critical upward communication: Ten commandments for improving strategy and decision making](#)'.

⁸ Bolden, R. (2011), '[Distributed leadership in organizations: A review of theory and research](#)'.

Looking forward, greater research is needed in the following areas:

- What contexts are most in need of more distributed forms of leadership? When such models are introduced, how can we measure their effectiveness?
- What are the barriers that organisations face, both from already established leaders used to a command style of leading, and from other staff who may resist taking more responsibility?
- What forms of leadership development are more effective in this environment?
- How can we ensure that distributed forms of leadership enhance an organisation's ability to achieve its goals?

This last point is especially crucial. Where leadership development is evaluated at all, it tends to be in terms of how satisfied those involved are with their experience. I suggest that it should actually be evaluated by the extent to which it improves an organisation's ability to achieve its goals.⁹

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⁹ Tourish, D. (2012), '[Developing leaders in turbulent times: Five steps towards integrating soft practices with hard measures of organizational performance](#)'.