



LIVING LEADERSHIP

A Practical Guide for Ordinary Heroes



George Binney
Colin Williams
Gerhard Wilke

THIRD EDITION

FT PUBLISHING
FINANCIAL TIMES

Here is what other leaders said about *Living Leadership*

“By living along-side real leaders for extended periods of time, the authors cut through the ‘how-to’ leadership oversimplification and provide extremely valuable insights for those in leadership roles.”

Kai Peters, Chief Executive, Ashridge Business School

“This book strips away the mystique of the heroic and charismatic leader and helps you lead more effectively.”

Konstantin Mettenheimer, former Senior Partner, Freshfields, Bruckhaus Deringer

“[*Living Leadership*] gets to the core of leadership: the gritty reality, not the acceptable face or academic frameworks.”

Paul Heiden, former CEO, FKI plc & Group Finance Director, Rolls Royce plc

“... it’s not just a management book. It’s more like being on a psychoanalyst’s couch. You feel like the authors are getting into your head, empathising with the way you feel and helping you with your thinking.”

Quentin Poole, Senior Partner, Wragge & Co LLP

“... an unvarnished account of leadership in action, with all its anxiety, uncertainty, false certainty and crippling expectation. [The authors] dispel the myths of leadership, they eschew recipes and homilies; instead they give us some real insight and wisdom into the constraints and possibilities of ‘living leadership’.”

Bill Critchley, Organisation Consultant

“I have used the ideas from *Living Leadership* to help me take up new leadership positions on two occasions: they are pragmatic and helpful.”

Kai Siedlatzek, Vice President, Finance, Volkswagen Argentina

“Since I was taught about *Living Leadership* at Ashridge Business School I have been a fan of its main arguments, and the great experience and enormous understanding of human beings it is based on. In the book, *Living Leadership*, you are taught that leadership is exactly as tough and hard as real life. A book that is written for everyone working with and delivering through people in business and public sector organisations.”

Kim Bohr, Director of Music, DR Broadcasting Corporation

“*Living Leadership* struck a real cord with me. In the quiet of sleepless nights it’s precisely the type of themes explored in this book that have aided my success. Great leadership is not about slick presentation. It’s about embracing a continual leadership responsibility as second nature in every interaction. Ultimately it’s the ability to connect to people in a ‘real time real world’ way.”

Trevor Bish-Jones former Chief Executive, Woolworths Group plc

Living Leadership

|| a practical guide for ordinary
|| heroes

Third Edition

George Binney • Gerhard Wilke • Colin Williams

Illustrations by Didier Gallon

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Gerhard Wilke is a leadership and organisational development consultant. He has coached executive leaders, middle managers and helped them release the energy locked up in their teams and departments. Gerhard has clients across Europe and is an Associate of Ashridge Business School. He is an Anthropologist and Group Analyst and has researched, published and lectured throughout his career in the fields of leadership, organisational development, social change and group dynamics. His particular expertise is in helping teams, departments and whole organisations get unstuck, when they have got stuck and need to hold each other to account for what has happened and how to move forward.

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The core team who undertook the research, in addition to ourselves, was:

Richard Elsner
and from

Groupe HEC

Gilles Amado
Rachel Amato

Ashridge Consulting

Howard Atkins
Elizabeth Braiden
Kathleen King.

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George Binney, Gerhard Wilke and Colin Williams

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Preface

Living Leadership

This is a book for people at all levels who make organisations work, day by day: a practical guide for ordinary heroes. If you lead a project team or group of workers, a function or business unit, a professional body or company, if you have power and authority over others, or just feel strongly about the direction of your organisation, this book is for you.

This book is about getting connected. Leading happens *between* people. It is not the property of the leader or of the followers. Leaders lead when they connect with others in ways that help them to seize opportunities or tackle problems that otherwise they could not address.

Living Leadership is born from the real joy and pain of leading. It is based on extensive international research into the realities of leading in organisations today that found that the business and organisational world is still half in love with the idea of transformational heroes. When the going gets tough, people often look for magical figures that will reduce the issues to easy simplicities and get them off the hook of taking responsibility themselves. This search for heroes is reminiscent of all those Hollywood films where the hero saves the world and ordinary people look on in wonder.

We found the organisational world groping its way towards a more realistic, less idealistic view of leaders. This is one in which people at many levels and places take responsibility. It is one in which leaders connect with others, work with, not against, the people around them and come alive because they bring more of themselves to their leading. It is a more human, do-able way of leading. Each moment contains choices for leaders. Consciously

picking them up will get you further than all the heroic fantasies about what leaders ought to do.

Our conviction, following our research, is that people in organisations have the potential to lead much more than they do at present. The way to realise this potential is not by looking out there for the answer, but by returning to things you know, things that life has already taught you.

We want you to stop thinking in terms of deficits. You are good enough as a leader as you are. In this book we will show you how.

Our research

Over four years, with the support of Ashridge, the international business school based in the UK, and Groupe HEC in France, we lived alongside leaders and followers in leading organisations across Europe. We observed them as they worked, we discussed with them, in the moment, the challenges and opportunities that they faced and we made sense, with leaders and followers together, of what was happening. We have checked our findings from these case studies in interviews with business leaders and in workshops and conferences involving thousands of managers and leaders.

As well as ourselves and Richard Elsner, the core research team included Howard Atkins, Elizabeth Braiden and Kathleen King of Ashridge Consulting, and Gilles Amado and Rachel Amato of HEC.

For further information about the research, look at pages 295–296.

Introduction to the third edition

It is now seven years since *Living Leadership* was first published. The three of us have presented and discussed the stories and ideas in the book with thousands of managers and leaders all around the world: in leading international and local companies, in public service organisations and in a wide range of professional and service firms.

What hit home in these sessions?

The conclusion has been the same: whether we are talking in an organisation with more than 100,000 employees or one with 100, whether we are talking to the private or public sectors, whether we are in Germany, the UK, France, the USA, Brazil, China, Thailand or any other place – the ideas and suggestions of *Living Leadership* resonate with people. They found their reality in the book.

Mary Kennedy, a colleague, puts it this way: “What you say comes as an enormous relief. Instead of trying to live up to some ideal, individuals who want to lead can be who they are. And they see what they can work on: step by step, learning to lead in the moment, be that in a meeting, in a corridor, with their boss or with a client.”

People recognise the ordinary nature of successful leading in the moment – how special it is and how difficult it can sometimes be to find the courage and the resources to lead.

We have seen people recall the benefits of taking the risk to “get real” and “get connected”. They gain respect and authority. They are more able to delegate and trust and to get the work done through others. They get more space and time to think and work out what is needed. The people around them trust them more and test them less.

People found their experience validated in *Living Leadership*: the constant dilemmas (we call them zones of choice) they face as leaders; the feelings that some days they are sinking, other days they are swimming or surfing; the acute need, sometimes, for self-preservation to be able to function effectively; the challenge of working out what is do-able in an age of endless targets and manic pressures.

Instead of looking outside themselves for some perfect model, they can look within, to their experience of life, to help them to lead and work through others. As one German manager said to us after we had presented *Living Leadership*: “We know all that – and we have forgotten. It is good to be reminded.”

How have ideas developed since the first edition?

Since the first edition was published, our focus has been on developing individuals and organisations and discovering how to enable more “ordinary heroes”. In Part 3 we describe an example of developing “Living Leadership” in practice – a project in which we have been privileged to work with hundreds of leaders of health research over three years and help them achieve more of what matters most to them.

1 part

What it is

In Part 1 we explore what *Living Leadership* is. Chapter 1 summarises the whole picture. In Chapter 2 we look at letting go of the widespread assumption that leaders should be transforming heroes – a picture that is difficult to shake off because so many managers take it for granted and can't see any alternative.

We then explore the three big themes of *Living Leadership*:

- **chapter 3 – get connected:** how you can connect effectively with others;
- **chapter 4 – get real:** how you can practise the art of the possible and not get caught up in fantasies about changing the world;
- **chapter 5 – get help:** how you can “be your best” if you value your experience of life and make good use of both your strengths and your apparent weaknesses.

In Chapter 6 we look at the importance of recognising that you will not be at your best all the time and how to learn from moments when you are less effective. Chapter 7 deals with the choices that you make as a leader, from moment to moment, that shape your impact on others and suggests that the more aware you are of these choices, the more effective you can be as a leader.

1 Living leadership

Find yourself in leading people

The best is the enemy of the good.

Voltaire

Living Leadership describes the leadership that really lives in organisations today. There are a thousand books on leadership theory but little has been done to understand how ordinary mortals lead in real organisations. We offer our view of the reality of leadership, what works and what doesn't – based on more than 20 years of working with leaders and the unique, four-year research project in which we lived alongside leaders and their organisations. The picture we got from being with leaders and followers in the moment was very different from the sanitised, cleaned-up view that you get in most management research when you interview people after the event. When you are with people, as events unfold, you experience the excitement and anxiety, the elation and terror, the self-belief and self-doubt of leading and following.

To hell with great men

Leadership for some people is something they are born with. It is a quality possessed by a few great figures (usually men) that have the ability to see ahead, take courageous stands and inspire others. It is often associated with those who have charisma – an almost magical ability to persuade and inspire others. It is something a few demonstrate “from the school playground” onwards. You either have it or you don't. It's not something you can develop.

We disagree.

The three themes of living leadership

1 Leading happens between people

Leadership is not the property of the leader (as many have argued) – nor (as some have suggested) of the followers. It is what happens *between* people in a particular moment or situation. Leadership is a social process – the result of interactions between and within individuals and groups. It is both very personal and a product of groups and the overall business and organisational context.

Leaders are on stage, playing a role for and with others. They embody certain qualities or characteristics for other people. They become public property on to which other people project things – whether the leaders like it or not. Sometimes people make their leader a hero; sometimes a scapegoat. Leaders can't avoid these dynamics but they can work with them and look for opportunities to harness them in the service of their organisations.

They have to focus on the people around them and not just the work to be done. To be effective, leaders have to connect with the people around them. People work for people. The vital ingredient is the quality of the relationships between those designated to lead and those who depend on them.

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people

If leadership happens between people, it is important to look at the dynamics of the situation, organisation or group as well as the individual leader. Leadership books have focused too much on the individual; we need to look at the people around the leader, how leadership works for them. Instead of seeing the leader as *on top* doing things *to* organisations, it suggests we should think about leaders *as part of* the organisation, *in the middle*, having an influence but also being shaped by the organisation and the business context.

2 Leaders are shaped by the context

The leadership that comes to exist between a leader and followers is context specific. The social and political environment, the business situation and the culture of an organisation (its characteristic patterns of thinking and behaving) shape the type of leadership that is given. Yes, the personality and working style of the leader are significant but more important is the context within which people are working.

For many people this is an uncomfortable conclusion. People are so used to thinking – or taking for granted – that individuals can change the world that it can be shocking to be reminded about the limits within which leaders work.

We found that leaders could not transform their business environment, organisational culture and people and group dynamics in the way they hoped. All but one of the leaders studied set out to achieve a complete change – a business turnaround, a fundamental change of culture or the development of a new enterprise. Try as they would to wrench their organisations into submission, their organisations bit back. Without exception, the transformations they sought were not achieved. The results they achieved were more down to earth than the original expectations – though, except in one case, regarded by their companies as successes.

leaders could not transform their business environment, organisational culture and people and group dynamics in the way they hoped

Successful leadership is a living thing. It cannot be bottled and reduced to a simple formula. What constitutes leadership is subtle and situational. In one moment it can be to direct people, to say clearly, “This is what needs to be done, this is what I want you to do”. Or it can be to offer a goal or objective and ask others to decide how to get there. In one moment, it can be to face uncertainty, to say, “I don’t know where to go or how to get there

but together we'll find out". And in another moment it is not to *do* anything; it is just the way someone *is* that speaks to others.

And because context is so important, what works in one moment, with one group of people, does not work with another. You can test this by seeing how people evoke different responses at different times and in different situations. In one context an individual gets a powerful response from others and is able to lead; at another time he¹ tries to lead but no-one follows.

People recognise this pattern but don't want to talk about it. It's time to talk openly about the realities of leadership, what can be achieved and what can't. The leaders in our study became more effective when they accepted the contexts they were in and focused on how to turn them to their advantage. Instead of wringing their hands at difficult business environments, they looked for footholds for the direction they wished to travel. Instead of denouncing their organisational cultures, they looked for the "magic" in them on which they might build.

it's time to talk openly about the realities of leadership

3 People are most effective when they bring themselves to leading

If leaders are to connect with others and understand the context, they need to bring themselves to the job of leading. Leaders "bring themselves" in that they:

- come across to others as real people, real flesh and blood, and not wearing some sort of mask or pretence;
- draw on all their humanity, their intelligence, their emotions and their intuition: they don't stay in their heads and draw just

¹ Gender: in this book we use both male and female adjectives and pronouns when talking about leaders in general. There is no significance in the choice of masculine or feminine pronouns for particular chapters. We worked with both male and female leaders. The majority were men but some of the leaders from whom we have learnt most were women. We suspect that *Living Leadership* comes more easily to some women than to many men.

on their rational selves, they make use of all their senses and intelligence;

- remember what they know from all their life experiences and make use of them in the world of work.

We observed that when leaders did this, in a particular moment and context, the people around them responded to their lead.

“Bringing yourself” is different from “being yourself”. Because leading happens *between* people, any leader is on stage and is performing in the best sense. At the same time people sense quickly if others are wearing a mask or pretending. In any interchange only part of their attention goes to the words you use. People also attend to all the other, often silent, signals that are sent – body language, looks, the feel of the person. It is said that when people see politicians they rarely remember what they said but often they recall how they looked and make their judgements accordingly. The people who work with you are also weighing you up instinctively: “Is this someone I can trust? Can I get a feel for the real person here?”

So leaders play a role – but to be effective it has to be a role they can credibly play, a part to which they can bring themselves. To an extent, it’s like an actor considering a role in *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. “Is that a role for me – one in which I will be convincing? Or is it one where I will not be comfortable, not be able to come alive?”

There wasn’t a particular type of leader – directive or consultative, outgoing or introverted, visionary or practical – who was more successful than others. We saw many different styles of leadership that were effective. What mattered was that the leaders were playing a role that suited them; one that they could credibly bring themselves to and one that those following saw as authoritative.

There is another part to this “bringing yourself”. It is the ability to come alive in the moment, to be fully present, with others. The most effective leading we saw was when leaders had a quality of personal presence, in the moment, which was remarkable. At their best, people who were with them had a sense that they had

all the leader's attention. The leaders were focused on the people with them and not distracted by other pressures. They weren't looking over their shoulders at the next person, the bosses in the background or the next task. They were here, now, concentrating on the people around them.

Leaders burdened with unreal expectations

At the same time we were constantly frustrated by how burdened leaders were by the sense of what they *ought to be* as leaders. People in positions of authority often carried a huge weight of expectations about what a leader should be. This was a burden that stopped them bringing themselves to leading. We often saw people in positions of responsibility simply *surviving*, getting through from one day to the next. At these times they were focused desperately on getting the work done. They didn't relate to the people around them. They were in a bubble, largely cut off from others and the world around them. They were bogged down in operational tasks, staggering from one moment to the next under the weight of expectations and lists of things to do.

Sometimes it was almost physically painful to see highly capable individuals, who had the best of intentions about the way they wanted to lead, behave badly as leaders. Sometimes we saw leaders treating their subordinates like children, handing out assignments and publicly assessing their past work. At other moments leaders were detached from the people they depended on for results and failed to communicate essential information. Sometimes they pretended to know things that plainly they did not. It would be easy to write off the managers we worked with as incompetent leaders. They were not this at all. They were successful managers and leaders in world-class organisations, yet at times they fell victim to the impossible pressures placed on leaders today.

It was interesting to see who were put forward as role models for leadership. We often heard the same list: Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Margaret Thatcher. These were extraordinary people for extraordinary times. But what about the more mundane, day-to-day, yet essential leadership

needed in most organisations in ordinary times? As a leader for a business or hospital, a refuse cleaning service or professional firm, do you really need to pretend to be Nelson Mandela?

It's the imperfections that make leaders valuable

We found that leaders are far from perfect. At some level people know this too; yet they still act as if leaders are supermen and women. Leaders are driven by deep-seated, highly personal reasons to achieve something, prove something or fix something about themselves. What is different about leaders is that they are driven to speak and act more on behalf of the “we” than the “me”. The leaders we saw were preoccupied with getting recognised and not getting rejected. They used this motivation to become effective leaders of successful organisations. The mosaic of their personalities was not a simple pattern of strengths to be developed and weaknesses to be minimised. There is no competency model that can be applied to build the ideal leader. Leaders are effective when they are able to bring how they really are to the task they have chosen: when they engage fully with others, when they retain the capacity to think clearly under huge pressure, when they recognise self-doubt as a powerful aid, when they accept that “good enough” is often a whole lot better than perfection, when they work with others “as they are” rather than expecting blind loyalty. Leaders command respect because they are real: passionate, hard working and committed, but not perfect.

The stories from our research give a sense of what it really feels like to be in the “eye of the storm”. They include the actions, reactions and interactions that made a difference as leaders and others played out their dramas. The stories describe what leaders did, why they did it and the results they expected. Most importantly, we followed each story through to discover what actually happened.

Far from finding a tidy sequential process of creating a vision, then inspiring others through charismatic and persuasive communication, we found intensive, emotional journeys, for both

leaders and followers, that were at times unclear, confusing and difficult but often engaging, stimulating, exciting and rewarding. There were highs, lows and all points in between. These were the journeys of leaders “coming alive”, giving of their best when it was needed – and finding that they did not need to be superheroes.

Living with uncertainty

The purpose of leadership is also different in our picture. In many of the situations we experienced there was no one person who could see the way forward and guide others. The future was uncertain. The prevailing belief that a leader would come along and show the way to the “promised land” was a myth. Even if the leader was right about the general direction the organisation needed to travel, there was a huge amount to learn about what that direction meant and how the organisation could move in that direction. The applied intelligence of groups and whole organisations was needed if the way forward was to be found.

We recognise that this runs counter to strongly held assumptions that finding the right person – be it chief executive or expert – will make all the difference to the future of organisations. But as James Surowiecki² says:

if you can assemble a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of insight and knowledge, you're better off entrusting it with major decisions rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are ... There is no real evidence that one can become expert in something as broad as “decision making” or “policy” or “strategy”. Auto repair, piloting, skiing, perhaps even management: these are skills that yield to application, hard work and native talent. But forecasting an uncertain future and deciding the best course of action in the face of that future are much less likely to do so.

Leadership is not then about knowing the answer and inspiring others to follow. It is the capacity to release the collective

² James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds – Why the Many are Smarter than the Few*, Random House, 2004.

intelligence and insight of groups and organisations. It is helping people to find their own answers. There are things that you as a leader need to know if you are to be credible but there are also moments when you need to say “I don’t know” if others are to confront difficult issues and learn how to overcome them.

■ leadership is not about knowing the answer;
■ it is the capacity to release the collective
■ intelligence and insight of groups and
■ organisations

In our minds, you lead when you help others to tackle an issue or seize an opportunity that would not otherwise be addressed. The focus is on triggering some collective capacity for valuable thought and action. These acts of leadership are not often in the heroic mould of one individual standing resolute against the world. Rather, they catalyse a development for a group or organisation. At the right moment, people follow once the lead has been provided. The act of leadership enables others to shift their thinking, to get moving and to deal with issues that have previously been stuck.

Leading involves taking responsibility, seeing things through over a period, being a beacon to others by presence, word or action. It’s not just expressing a view or perspective or making an impact in the moment. It’s consistency and courage that act as a guide to others.

Many leaders

Living Leadership implies that *many* people can and need to be leaders, not just the *few*. In our research we were constantly reminded that those with power and position in organisations are not the only ones who need to lead. Very often it was the people who did *not* have formal power over others who were more able to lead in the moment than those who were in positions of authority. It seemed that while the formal leader was burdened, slowed down by the weight of impossible expectations, others were sometimes able to look reality in the face and identify what was

needed. Modern organisations need the many to lead at different times and in different ways.

Because leadership is a social process, acts of leadership don't exclusively come from those who have the position of boss. Something that surprised us in our research was how often the groups around a formal leader were more able to lead than the leader.

Authority

We also noticed the reluctance now in many organisations to acknowledge the importance of authority, the need of people to have a safe enough and secure enough sense that there are others on whom they can depend to guide them. Any parent and any child knows the value and importance of authority, someone to rely on, someone to prove something to. Yet in many places managers are reluctant to acknowledge that anyone has authority over others and pretend that their unit or organisation is “flat” and everyone has an equal contribution to make.

We experienced repeatedly that groups and organisations do need leading. The idea of the totally flat organisation is a myth and adds frustration rather than freeing people up. In every organisation we worked in there were key moments when someone had to step forward and lead if the group or organisation was to move forward. We also saw the pressing need for good-enough authority figures.

SVEN'S STORY

Sven was the leader of Information Technology in an international manufacturing company. He was responsible for keeping up with the insatiable demand from businesses around the world for an improved IT service. For nine months he had led the multinational team of IT managers, each of whom had a “dotted line” relationship with him and a “solid line” relationship with the regional business boss. When reflecting privately on a three-day meeting that he had just had with the team, he said he wanted

to change the relationship he had with his team: he wanted to develop a “personal contract” with each member of the team. “I have to trust them,” he said. “I am not their CEO, I have to find a balance, a managerial process that works with them. I have to hold the pressure for results and give them more room. Am I a template manager, someone who feeds in lots of processes and templates for others to use in completing their tasks? Yes, I have driven that approach too much.” After exploring the costs of excessive use of templates, he suddenly blurted out, “So, what I need to do is relate to them more as people, is that it?”

Implications of living leadership

If this view is correct, if leaders are most effective when they bring themselves to leading, if leading happens between people and is shaped by the context, what are the implications for you? If you want to lead, what should you do or think about? When you are a follower, what helps?

Get connected

The first priority for leaders and those around them is to get connected – for leaders to relate well enough to the people around them as well as to the task to be done. This requires leaders and others to “get personal” and to show something of themselves. It may mean getting to know people on a social level – but often we saw that the connection was made just in a work setting.

By “getting connected” we mean:

- enough openness and trust to confront difficult issues openly;
- enough respect to make people want to work with others and make the extra effort for them;
- enough shared values and perspectives to enable effective joint working;
- enough conflict to widen and deepen the exchanges and make real trust possible.

Such characteristics are easy to describe but difficult to achieve. One of the experiences we had repeatedly in the research was leaders espousing values like openness, trust and respect and then, despite apparently having the best of intentions, practising something very different. The practical question is therefore: “What gets in the way, in reality?” “What are the obstacles that stop you connecting well enough to the people around you?”

In our research it was obvious to some leaders that they had to connect at a personal level – and a mystery to others. Some leaders at some times focused only on the work to be done together and tried to ignore the need to build good-enough, working relationships. The price they paid at these moments was that they got, at best, compliance from their people and, at worst, sullen opposition. At other times, when they connected with the people around them, they discovered energetic and insightful followers.

Get real

The challenge for the leader is to work with “what is”:

- the relationships in the room;
- the connections to others;
- the culture of the organisation;
- the business and social environment.

Living Leadership connects up the work, the people and the interactions in the group in a way that provides enough safety, over time, to tackle the real difficulties and opportunities.

Living Leadership focuses on making the best use of what *is* and not attempting to transform everything. The effort to bring about revolution within individuals, groups and organisations is both mad and dangerous. Mad because sane adults, groups and organisations don’t change utterly. Dangerous because we have enough examples from history – from Lenin to Hitler to Mao – to know that revolutions often start by drawing on people’s idealism but end in abuse and dictatorship. Leadership should be about

fulfilling the purposes of organisations and not pretending to transform them every time leaders change.

There is no formula people can follow that will tell them how to lead in a particular situation. What constitutes effective leadership, now, here, today, needs to be discovered in the moment. It's no good looking outside the organisation for *the* answer. It does not exist. The picture we offer of leaders is not another business school model. There is no one model of leaders. It's absurd to say there is one set of rules for a successful marriage or relationship. So it is laughable to say there is only one way of being a successful leader.

A "living leader" exists with others: he is in tune, playing in the same key, within the same overall structure. He is giving and taking energy from others, helping and being helped simultaneously. He has an understanding of harmony and dissonance and yet is not constrained by a score or script.

He is ordinary and extra-ordinary. Sometimes he "plays a solo" that is inspiring, uplifting, hugely rewarding and personally exhausting – and it makes or breaks the overall performance. Most of the time he is "pumping chords" quietly in the



Coming alive as a leader

background to keep the rhythm steady. Like the jazz musician, he has worked hard for years to acquire a range of basic skills, practising and polishing them regularly, yet nothing exists to tell him exactly what to do at a given moment. That requires intuition, adaptability, an understanding of the context, a range of possible options to draw from, a feeling for what others need from him, a generosity of spirit to give and the courage to put himself “on the line”.

Get help

The third requirement for effective leading is being able to ask for help when you need it – and knowing when to offer help to others. This requires leaders to use themselves well, drawing on their emotions and feelings, intuition and intelligence.

Can people learn how to be a better leader? You bet they can! However, leaders don't become more effective by trying to learn some formula. If, as we found, there is no one model or tool kit that says how to be a successful leader, then the education needed is in self-awareness. The more aware leaders are of who they are, how others see them, what choices they are making and the consequences of those choices, the more effectively they can use themselves and have the impact they want to have.

Our experience with the research reinforces our view that the place to focus development is on leaders appreciating who they are, not trying to be somebody they are not. We found that leadership competencies can be a useful tool but can also be damaging as a means for assessing potential leaders and their learning needs. Comparing individuals against an idealised picture of what leaders should be leads to “deficit thinking” in which people become preoccupied with filling “gaps” in their competencies and end up trying to be somebody they are not. In fact, it is the flaws in people that make them interesting and give them their drive. The practical and encouraging question is not how to “correct” flaws but how to make best use of the special qualities each individual has and how to complement what they haven't got with the special abilities of others.

When leaders were most effective they were able to make use of the full extent of their own resources and skills. They gave of their best and enabled others to give of their best. They didn't just survive. They remembered what they knew from all their life experiences and made use of it in the world of work. They drew on their intuition and their feelings. They stopped being one-dimensional change agents and made use of their humanity. They stopped trying to live up to an impossible ideal and were free to adapt themselves to the needs of the moment. They gave up trying to shape the world as they would like and faced life as it is.

Like Philip Pullman in his award-winning *His Dark Materials*³ trilogy, we say that the effort to cut yourself and others in half, and describe one side as “evil” and the other as “good” – one part as strength, one part as weakness – is a denial of humanity. It is an illusion that is profoundly damaging. How much better if people can value themselves and their organisations as a whole, to see themselves and others not as black and white but infinite colours and both good and bad. How much better to see some of the contradictions and links and not try and change them – to see how demons can be strengths and assets can be liabilities, depending on the context.

Character not charisma

Many people have asked us: “Do I have to be charismatic to be a leader?” For us the answer is “No”. Leadership does not require charisma. People can be triggered to see issues and possibilities differently without leaders being charismatic. Our view is that charisma is a social process, as is leading. Charisma exists *between* people in particular moments and circumstances and is not a quality of one individual.

Charisma can be a wonderful thing. We experienced it sometimes in our research and we were bowled over by it. But we are also suspicious of it. We wonder why people want to abandon responsibility and be led by a masterful, charismatic leader. We

³ Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Scholastic Press, 2001.

ask whether the charismatic person is meeting their own needs at the expense of those of others. Jim Collins, author of the book *Good to Great*, puts forward the interesting proposition that, “A charismatic CEO can win every argument regardless of the facts. A non-charismatic CEO has to win on the merits of the argument.”⁴

Character, on the other hand, we found, was an essential ingredient of leadership. It was people who had a moral strength – with views, opinions, feelings, beliefs that did not change from moment to moment but gave others a sense that “you know who you are dealing with”. When we saw people being effective leaders, they were not necessarily colourful or outgoing. But they were people of substance.

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The ethics of leading

There is, of course, an ethical dimension to leadership. The picture we offer here is of human leadership, one that is respectful of other people and oneself. There could be other types of leadership that deliver results, at least in the short term, but that abuse people or treat them dishonestly and are unsustainable.

We take issue with transformational leadership not least because it is associated with people being treated as cogs in a machine, resources to be recruited and thrown away as if they are pieces of machinery. That does not seem to us an acceptable way of leading people. Part of leadership is taking tough, uncomfortable decisions. However, tough decisions and actions can still be handled in a way that is respectful of individuals, groups and institutions.

⁴ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, Random House Business Books, 2001.