

A triad of leaders

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ABSTRACT: Among the many mysteries of leadership, there is the occasional question: *How did he (or, of course, she) get there?* As an answer to that one can adapt, with all due deference, phrases from the bard of Avon: *Some are born to leadership, some achieve leadership, and some have leadership thrust upon them.* Having settled that question one moves to another: *How do they perform as leaders?* Or, more elegantly: *What is their modus operandi?* The answer to that relates, probably, to the first question-and-answer; examples may be found around in business and politics, and are (quite unintentionally) shown by activities of characters in a recently published novel by the author, namely, *the Chief Executive, the Project Manager, and the unions' shop steward.*

Keywords: Leadership, management, differences and methods

INTRODUCTION

Reading the above may promote protestations, such as: *This article is to be based on fiction?* Yes, indeed, it is. But much of fictional writing is based on actual events and many fictional characters are modeled on real people. Such is the case, here, in the novel *A Project in Ammonia* [1], there are three characters, all leaders and all different, people in situations, all of which are modeled from observations made through the author's time in industry and academia. Examination of these fictitious people in their equally fictitious milieu can give some insight into what one might expect in the real world, and the lessons, which may be extracted from them can be fitted into the future. Admittedly, some invention has been incorporated here and there to add verisimilitude to an otherwise unconvincing narrative, just as the public official Pooh-Bah remarked in *The Mikado* [2].

A TRIAD OF LEADERS?

As remarked above, this is about three leaders, so why not *a trio*? That word is not used because the three in a trio (as in a musical group) work together, and although these three all work in the same company (Empire Chemical Limited), they are well separated by position and, hence, do not work together ... although to some extent, in some ways, they share objectives. *Triad*, therefore, seems to be a more appropriate collective noun.

Each provides an illustration of how a leader come to the position, how each has a crisis develop, and how each reacts to that situation in his own way.

THE SCENARIO

The novel's overall scenario is in a future time, when the world's population has increased to an unacceptable level and an established and reasonably effective World Government is trying to reduce numbers by tight control of certain human activities and, in parallel, by forced emigration to colonies on other-worlds (the historic term *transportation* is used but not in political circles). One control measure is keeping employed as many as possible, which means many are in jobs just to keep them busy while many are paid to do nothing ... admittedly, hypothetical, but all of which is a somewhat logical extension of some conditions of today's society.

THE COMPANY

The company, which forms the background of this novel and others in the author's *Ammonia series* is Empire Chemicals Limited, a very old, very large manufacturing organisation, employing a large number of people, spread over a large number of locations. Unfortunately, in this hypothetical turn of history, the combination of its age and world circumstances have brought this firm from being a dynamic entity to a still-alive-but-doddering body, no development, no innovation, everything stagnating, running down.

SOME ARE BORN TO LEADERSHIP

The events described in this section form much of the background of *A Project in Ammonia*, but are taken from the draft of a novel titled *A Plant for Appropriate Technology* [3], which precedes the *Project* novel.

The Chief Executive, Sir Dennis Norden, has occupied that position for over ten years. His education, Bachelor of Engineering, allowed him to start in the firm at a reasonable professional level, and through some decades he moved through the ranks to heading the company's activities, where he inherited from his predecessor a curious top-level structure reporting to him, with six Executive Directors, each responsible for a Head Office function, and four Regional Directors, each controlling the firm's activities in a territory. All appeared to be reasonably competent people, but ...

About halfway through those ten years, he experienced an uneasy sensation, which began with a feeling of *I'm not doing much in this job*. He was, of course, comparing his new position with his previous several, in which he had been continuously busy. He conversed with his Executive Directors and became convinced they were not *really busy*, too, and more interested in their personal well-being than that of the company. The impression from the Regional Directors was that they were reasonably busy, but mainly in preserving the *status quo* in each region.

His worrying about the firm's future led him to seek someone external to talk about it and in that met Professor John Huntsman in the London Business School. With fellow academics Huntsman probed into the firm and issued a quasi-medical report: Empire Chemicals' condition is serious, near terminal, it has a life expectancy of ten years at the outside.

This is, without doubt, a crisis situation. Alternatives? He could sit tight, allow time to pass, and take a very satisfactory retirement package. No. He decided to try to make a change to bring life back into the company. But how? Everything's tied to the way it is, including his managers, who showed no inclination to shift to a different direction. Then one day, while he was contemplating this corporate conundrum, his formidable secretary (a lady who listened to all in-company gossip) brought him a proposal, which had been submitted by an engineer in the Technical Division; it had gone through the appropriate channels, gathering little dust but many doubts on the way, it had been reviewed by the Executive Directors, rejected and buried. But not cremated, his secretary exhumed it and delivered it to her boss.

The engineer had noticed that a distant colony world was importing large quantities of urea. He asked: why? He found the soil there lacked nitrogen, so they needed nitrogenous fertilizer for the high-protein plant they grew as a meat substitute. With three fellow-employees, the engineer had proposed the firm should build an ammonia factory for local production there, instead of exporting the fertilizer to there.

From then on, Sir Dennis exhibited shrewd leadership tactics. Subtle and indirect questioning forced the Directors to reveal what they had seen, progressing to discussing how to deal with the proposal in the normally prescribed manner. Finally, in the belief this would kill the notion completely, they agreed to send an investigator to the colony, and the Finance Director recommended her preferred person from within her department. Sir Dennis gently hummed and hah-ed over that, questioning the cost and the Finance Director talked about value-for-money: *It's cheaper to send one person for a few weeks than the team later to build the factory*. Sir Dennis agreed with that, then, had his faithful secretary drop a hint to the Technical Director's secretary that the investigator should be from *his* department because the idea came from there, and she passed it on as office gossip. Of course, the Technical Director woke up to what he was missing, charged into action, insisted the engineer (by now long forgotten in all this high-level maneuvering) who had written the proposal should go, argued his colleagues into agreement, pulled the engineer into his office, and told him to pack bags and be ready to go. During all that excitement Sir Dennis stayed out of the action.

The engineer went to the colony, discovered several favorable factors and various nuisance features, returned and reported formally, factually, to the Board. He also reported informally with sundry personal impressions to Sir Dennis. His findings and his manner convinced Sir Dennis he now might have a way to a better future, with the project at the colony developing a new group of management people by isolating them from Head Office conditions.

Through the next few months, the proposed project was brought up for discussion at many meetings, Directors together at formal Board meetings, at regular lunches, informal morning tea and afternoon tea meetings, and private ones and twos in individual offices. The Technical Director pushed it hard, although by the firm's standards it would be a relatively minor project it would boost his position. The Finance Director objected with; *Where are we getting the money?*" ... even though the colony had agreed to assist via local investment and tax breaks. The Legal Director

expressed worries about tying up their funds with off-world investment and taxation issues. The Director for Personnel and Industrial Relations (DPIR) went on about control of a workforce of people who had been isolated from civilization for generations and must have developed unsavory *mores*. The Marketing Director sat on the fence, saying yes and no at whatever times suited his benefits. The Operations Director (known in-company as the Mad Hatter) only listened.

Having to deal with what he could sense would be an antagonistic group, Sir Dennis did nothing. His secretary delivered to him all the gossip from the Director's secretaries and returned to them hints to stimulate their directors. The four who had written the proposal made nuisances of themselves by talking about it, and what their one member had found out in his visit, to the many who would listen in the Head Office crowd.

After several months, the Executive Directors delivered a proposal that the company should build an ammonia factory at the colony, curiously very similar to the one floated months before. Sir Dennis expressed surprise and repeated back to them, in his own words, all their earlier arguments against the idea. They replied: *Yes, yes, we know all that, we have dealt with those issues and have overcome those problems, difficulties, whatever, and the project should go ahead.* Behind that was the thought: *So we can get rid of it and certain people.* This Directors' agreement generated the need for Sir Dennis finally to put his foot down; they wanted the project to be managed by the person they had wanted to send as investigator, and for several reasons Sir Dennis insisted the four who had worked up the proposal should go without an external manager added to their group: he won that play hands down.

Approval followed. The four nuisances were plucked from Head Office, a manager appointed from within them, and sent to the colony. Part of the reasons for their selection was obvious; they had concocted this mad idea, which had disturbed the Executive Directors' time, patience and quiet enjoyment for weeks and weeks by making them do something, so their departure was more or less being exiled.

COMMENTS ABOUT THIS LEADER

First question: how did he get there? In the case of the Sir Dennis character, one can only accept he coupled natural ability with his twenty years experience after graduation to rise, in his forties, to the top of a large company.

The one natural ability credited to leaders, generally, in the literature on this topic is *wisdom* (for example, Newman [4] and Barker-Coy [5] who present this factor). That is a quality hard to define, indeed the Oxford dictionary begins by stating: *possession of experience and knowledge*, then, hedges that with: *together with the power of applying them critically or practically*, in other words, there is no use in having the one without the other. No doubt education provided basic knowledge, sharpened by experience, to a level of wisdom with which he saw the company's situation and the need for change. The significant addition was applying that to determining what to do and how to do it.

This opens the second question: how did he do it? The first reaction could have been to tell the group to stop their nonsense and to force them to act. But, because they buried the proposal, he could sense strong opposition. So, he manipulated them by various means until they came to him with what amounted to *their* proposal to act. Those who are being led will follow a leader's direction if it is *their* direction or, at least, if they believe it is *theirs*. Although that last sentence is recognised by the literature generally, there is very little about using a tactic such as described here, the nearest found is a group of essays edited by Barker and Coy [6]. One very good general reference gives twelve leadership techniques and a range of leadership styles, but has only hints on persuading an antagonistic team [7].

SOME ACHIEVE LEADERSHIP

Having a bright idea, having it accepted and developed within a small personal group, then, having it accepted by higher-level authority, *does not necessarily* display leadership. Events occurring during the first few project months illustrated that. The engineer, Arthur Glean, appointed as Project Manager took his position very seriously, to the extent of doing not only his own job, but parts of the jobs his team-members were to do.

A minor example: his associate, the Project Engineer (PE), said he would like to get someone to do a lot of the odd, peripheral tasks, which were popping up, and Arthur Glean took over contacting the local university to find students who could be hired for work experience. Two students were hired part-time, and even these youngsters could see Arthur was doing parts of others' jobs. This came to a head in a meeting with the Head Contractor when Arthur unintentionally revealed he had been giving directions to, and making agreements with, the Contractor instead of working through the PE, who was extremely annoyed and privately ticked off his boss, pointing out his behaviour was upsetting everyone. After that Arthur laments, in a soliloquy worthy of Hamlet, the need he feels to do everything himself, but instead of questioning that he drifts off into problems he has with several of his team.

Through these early months of the project, Sir Dennis was receiving regular progress reports through *the system* and, in parallel, informal reports from personal contacts; parents of two who had transferred from Head Office to the project. Putting the two versions together alarmed him so he conferred with Prof. Huntsman, they agreed there was a potentially serious problem *out there* and that Sir Dennis could not do anything officially. So, Huntsman sent Arthur Glean a copy

of a paper on various leadership styles written by some of his post-graduate students. It was a somewhat esoteric management exercise, but Arthur saw himself *as he is* in part of it and *how he should be* in another part. He decided to reform.

A few weeks later, the group reporting to Arthur chatted over those last few weeks during a social dinner, all puzzled by a change in their boss's behaviour, each gave examples of how he was busy and how he had helped solve problems taken to him, but they did not know what he was doing, all they knew was he was no longer doing bits of their jobs. He had changed from *making things happen by what he was doing* to *knowing what was happening without being directly involved*, helping only by providing inconspicuous guidance, and the team very quickly came to accept that they could act quite independently, provided their actions followed the project's objectives. Thus, Arthur was now *leading* the team instead of *driving* them. Shock treatment worked.

He continued behaving in this manner through the months to the commissioning day, when he stood back and allowed the team members, who had actually done most of the work, to set the main plant into operation (which is described in the sequel, *A Commissioning in Ammonia* [8]).

COMMENTS ABOUT THIS LEADER

For a manager to behave as a *one-man-band* is not uncommon and two work-related factors contribute to that: one is knowing what has to be done, that is, familiarity with the work (here as an engineer), hence, eagerness to apply that knowledge, the other is enthusiasm for the task and the enjoyment of accomplishing its activities. In this case, with the given hypothetical overall scenario, there would also have been relief from the boredom of working in the company's Head Office, of going through established procedures and stifling protocols. One may, therefore, pardon Arthur for falling into the one-man-band trap, and congratulate him for accepting the hint which led him to reform, and *lead*.

AND SOME HAVE LEADERSHIP THRUST UPON THEM

The DPIR's vague misgivings about the *natives* (actually, of course, migrants from years earlier) at the colony were somewhat correct in general, though uncertain in a particular and only one in number. The difference, essentially, between the workforce *at home* and at the colony was that the century or more of stability at home had caused trade unionism to disappear; those with employment were paid as a form of shareholder in the organisation. In parallel, the idea of workers striking to force workplace change had disappeared. However, driven by development necessary on a literally green-field site, a whole world, the colony had acquired an aggressive union movement and both the concept and potential for strike action, both a shock to Arthur and the PE.

The first indication of this was news that the contract workers had negotiated a bonus payment with their employer for finishing on time. The news was passed on to the few early-starters in what would become the Engineering Department, from whom it went on to the production employees. As the news circulated, there was a shuffling around, hunting for someone to represent the pack. No-one seemed to be the right person, and after a few weeks desultory mumbling between individuals and groups a tall, thin, trades-assistant who could talk and reason floated up as leader, not by appointment but by recognition, to be the one to organise negotiations with the management. He argued he did not want to do it, but the strength of his verbal opposition convinced his compatriots he was *the one*.

Thus, Harry Barger became a general shop steward for both sets of the factory workers, the engineering personnel and the chemical operators, the one talking to Arthur first about a bonus payment, then, the possibility of strike action and many other matters needing agreement between workforce and management. The negotiations proceed with workforce meetings in which others state, they should ask for a four-week start-up bonus, the same as the contract personnel will receive for completion-on-time. Harry, however, being aware of the difference between the contract workers and his group, settled with Arthur for a two-week bonus in return for assisting with a smooth start-up.

COMMENTS ABOUT THIS LEADER

The position taken by Harry is obviously delicate, he has to satisfy his fellow-workers but not offend management with excessive demands, expressed as requests. In today's society this is quite *normal*, in the hypothetical society of the *Ammonia series* it is no longer present *here*, but alive in this fictitious *elsewhere*.

He is presented as a *more than meets the eye* type of person, in a position low on the totem pole but able to relate what must be done to what can be done, the type who, if given greater opportunity earlier in life in, say, education, would probably be in a higher-level position. Perhaps he will head into local government?

ANALYSIS OF THE TRIAD

All three of these characters work for the same company. In the organisation structure there is one at the top, one in the middle and one close to the bottom. What are the leadership lessons from them?

In the Chief Executive, one sees he is confronted by a major crisis, not an immediate one, but one which the soothsayers have said is inevitable. He is leading a self-satisfied group, which he senses is likely to be antagonistic, potentially hostile, to change. With some external help, he chooses a path with some risk elements and by indirect persuasive action leads his group along that path, continuing along it to what looks like probable success.

In the Project Manager, one sees a person facing a crisis of his own making, his own well-intended behaviour slowly sets him apart from his group who can tell what he is doing but for a variety of reasons none feel like admonishing him ... until he is lucky, one of his team, a long-term friend, tells him to ease up. And, he is twice lucky, the Chief Executive arranges for him to be given information to help him understand his problem and to reform.

In the Trades Assistant, who became a general Shop Steward, they have one with an evolving crisis between his compatriots and management, one being talked about on both sides with rarely expressed confrontation between the parties. He is the classic meat-in-the-sandwich. No-one wants the payment request to result in a fight, so he keeps talking, keeping negotiations alive, until the time comes when agreement is essential and is reached.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

When *A Project in Ammonia* was written, as a series of weekly assignments for students and finally published in the expanded form, there was no thought it would show those three examples of leadership, each in a crisis-problem situation, and each solved in a different manner by different means. Fiction?

Yes, but in it, there is learning to be had by recognising the different routes to leadership and how different people apply different methods; it is also worth noting that the mysterious function *luck* can change a situation. Hence, one ends with another amended quote from some time ago: *There are more things in heaven and earth, dear engineer-educator, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

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BIOGRAPHY



Ronald Bentley Ward arrived in Sydney, New South Wales, on 6th October, 1928. He attended early schools in inner suburbs, then, Sydney Technical High School, still recognised as the one for engineers and scientists, which was in the 1940s located close to the city, now in a southern suburb. After passing the Leaving Certificate in 1945, he worked as an apprentice, then, as a tradesman toolmaker at the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation from 1946 to 1954. He, then, moved from aircraft engine manufacture to chemicals and worked with several firms in engineering positions up to 1979 when he opened his own consulting firm, specialising in project management. In 1984, he became a lecturer at the New South Wales Institute of Technology, which became the University of Technology, Sydney, and retired from that position in 2001. While working in industry, he completed a trades course in

fitting and machining, the Associateship Diploma (Mechanical Engineering) of the Sydney Technical College, Bachelor of Engineering at the University of New South Wales, and Master of Business Administration at Macquarie University. During the years at the University of Technology he returned to the University of New South Wales to research a thesis on the relationship between hazards and management practices in the chemical industry and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1995. He has published three books, one text on communication, another on engineering management and a third book outlining some engineering oddities, plus well over a hundred-and-forty papers on education, engineering, accidents, management and speculative topics, over a hundred-and-twenty expert witness reports. He has also written a series of one hundred-and-ten fictional case studies and two as-yet-unpublished novels. All of these exemplify his interest in engineering as a profession and the need of a broad education at the undergraduate level, where topics other than those purely technological should be included and presented in a manner to suit those students. He has lived in Sydney suburbs all his life, and travelled interstate and overseas many times to conferences

with his wife, Brenda. He has maintained his connection with engineering education by continuing to write and publish, and by having been accepted in 1998 as a Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Engineering of the University of New South Wales. He thanks WIETE for the invitation to submit this article for the Global Journal of Engineering Education.