Leadership and leopards

Ronald B. Ward

University of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT: There is an old adage which questions whether a leopard can change his spots, sometime expressed more as an affirmation, that a leopard *cannot* change his spots. This usually refers only to the African leopard, *panther pardus*, which is generally covered with black spots over a tawny yellow coat, not the other members of the species many of which have plain colour coats. The saying may have had some origin from noticing certain animals do change markings as they grow and develop, but those spotted leopards do not. The equivalent of the leopard's spots, presented here, is the management leadership styles outlined by many writers and, then, the question arising is whether, unlike the leopard, a manager can change his leadership style. To illustrate that a scenario and characters will be taken from a recently published novel in which the project manager, with the best of intentions, fell into the *one man band* style, which got results on a personal level, but failed to engage his team into working with him. Fortunately, he changed his style, not by his own efforts, but by being chided by one of his staff and being given a hint from outside.

INTRODUCTION

The article developed from this abstract will outline generally accepted notions of leaders' appointments and styles, how these fit with a range of characters in the novel, and how their behaviour illustrates aspects of leadership, using characters and situations in the novel and backed up by reference to the real world [1].

WHAT IS A LEADER?

Before making the connection between leopards and leadership, before introducing leopards, one should introduce leaders and leadership, which is the function a leader exercises.

Most of the flood of literature through the last forty-to-fifty years has been about *leadership* as an *activity*, very little about the central *person*, the *leader*. One of the few references specifically on leaders *per se* was Maccoby's study of six individuals, very definitely examining the person, each of whom had a definite leadership role, and from that he listed attributes of a good, successful leader:

> *...a caring, respectful, and responsible attitude, flexibility about people and organizational structure, and a participative approach to management, the willingness to share power. Furthermore, they are self-aware, conscious of their weaknesses as well as their strengths, concerned with self-development for themselves as well as others* [2].

Finding a brief definition of that person is difficult, so a quote is taken from the historical survey by Wills: *One who mobilizes others towards a goal shared by leader and followers* [3]. A very simple definition indeed, but adequate. Or is it? We will see.

Simply, a leader is said to be a person who, by virtue of position exercises control, that is, leadership, over a group of people, which they accept. The person's appointment may be by *ukase* from a higher authority, by selection from within the group by agreement or by personally taking-over the position. The group's intention, given to the appointed person, is that he or she will conduct the group though some action to a desired result.

WHY LEADERS?

This author cannot recall having seen, in all the thirty-two references cited in a previous paper, an answer to that question [4]. All one can deduce by observation is that groups automatically desire such a person, not only humans, but wolves, lions, elephants and many other animals also have group-leaders, though the contrary may also be observed:

leopards, cheetahs and some people prefer living in a solitary mode. But do we know why we have leaders? We do not. All we know is leaders appear or are appointed, and people follow them. Perhaps it is because, at the particular time, it seems to be a good idea.

NOW TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED DOGMA

The established dogma about leaders and leadership is, as above, that a *leader* has to have, automatically acquired, *followers* as evidence of being a leader. Does that mean a *leader* manages, that is, controls, followers? Perhaps? But if one looks into history and around the present time, one can see enough exceptions to that to ask for another definition.

Exceptions? A musician accomplished in piano or violin may be called a leader in the art, even when playing solo; then, if he/she plays a concerto with an orchestra he/she *leads* the music to some extent but under the direction of the conductor, so who is the *leader*? (To complicate this example the senior first violin is titled *leader of the orchestra*, a role which requires musical and administrative ability.) A surgeon highly skilled in performing a particular operation is often described as *a leader in that field*, but who is he/she *leading*? The team around him/her may be *following* his/her instructions but not in the classic *leadership* role. An academic, a research scholar, who independently opens a new line of thought or investigation in some area of knowledge is often said to be *the leader in that field*, but there are no followers in the work at the immediate time, although they may pop up later.

Those examples suggest a *leader* is defined only by having inspiration, courage of conviction and the ability to act according to those first two qualities. Such a definition covers any person in the above examples and in any similar non-follower situation. And, it also covers the *classic* leader and leadership situation of leader-plus-followers, which, the author suggests, can be observed only in politics, the military and religion, where that classic state of affairs certainly does occur.

NOW TO A SPECIFIC GROUPING OF PEOPLE

The one particular grouping being considered here is those people under control of a manager, working together to achieve a purpose. Depending on a number of factors, principally in the work-situation, one might find overtones of a military or religious nature in the employment of the followers, but generally the group is bound together by a mixture of monetary gain and personal satisfaction. The proportions of those realisations can differ widely; in a volunteer organisation the first may be zero and the second one hundred percent, but human nature, being what it is, most followers want some of each.

In the illustrative scenario, which will follow, there is the very conventional task-related and hierarchical management situation of a manager controlling several subordinates. But in management situations, do we find managers who are no more than manager-slave-drivers, or do we find some who are leaders? This author's opinion is the former is more common, although the latter does occur.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LEADERSHIP IN MANAGEMENT?

By now we know a great deal about the activity, what leaders do, provide, exert, perform, supervise, over a group. Definitions abound, all covering the classic case of leader-plus-followers, for example from Donnelly et al:

> *Leadership is the ability to persuade others to seek defined objectives enthusiastically. It is the human factor which holds a group together and motivates it towards goals* [5].

Having quoted that, from an esteemed management writer, one must point out it omits reference to wolves and the other animals which hold together in a group, responding to a leader. This present author fell into the same trap in 1997:

> *Leadership is a process of directing and influencing the task-related activities of individuals, sometimes singly but much more usually as members of a group, in a manner which those concerned find agreeable. Thus it's the purposeful action of one person applied to producing in others particular results, which may have been selected by the leader, by consensus of the group, or by an outside party* [6].

So, if one wants to be quite general, all those definitions should be reworded to cover *certain varieties of living entities*, which includes humans, while admitting that some of those *entities* (including some humans) prefer not to be under a leader's control - and all that broad argument has been stated here to emphasise just how complex the leader/leadership matter is, nowhere near as simple as it is explained in many of the texts available.

LEADER STYLES

It is curious that the relevant literature does not refer to *leader styles*, that is, directly to the leader's personal behavioral style or mannerisms, but to the style of what he/she does, that is, to his/her *leadership style*; however, the discussion here is about the former, the actual way in which a management leader acts out the role.

From an old but valuable book by Byrt, commonly-recognised manager-leader styles are:

Autocratic/authoritarian (very tight control, makes decisions and announces them).

Democratic/transactional (control varying from tight to loose, depending on very many factors, with the group members taking part in any decision-making, and may be manipulative by presenting problems, getting suggestions, making decisions based on group input).

Laissez faire (varies between defining limits so group makes decisions, to permitting autonomy within general limits, to control so loose that the group members go their own way and the leader is only a figure-head) [7].

Of course, the last, which is defined by using the French term *laissez faire*, because one does not have an English phrase to cover it, may be regarded as not a true leadership situation at all. In the business/industry situation, there are two alternative common results, if this *laissez faire* pattern becomes obvious: one of these is when the group is so active and self-disciplined that it perceives its task so well that it functions by itself (usually under the *control* of the informal structure); then, those higher up the hierarchy usually allow this situation to continue for as long as performance is satisfactory. The other is the group wanders off in its own direction, probably achieving an unintended result.

The way in which the leader can exercise the leadership function depends on factors, such as the manner of reaching the position (appointment, consensus, or seizure), the nature of the group's individual members and the circumstances of time a place. Knowing there is not one single style to success, and knowing group membership and circumstances can change raises the question: can a leader change style to match such changes? For the better, of course.

Thus, one comes to some illustrations of leaders and their styles presented in a recently published novel, all of whom are encompassed in an industrial scenario [1].

AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE ABOUT SCENARIOS

In its original use this word described the outline of the plot of a play, and in written form was attached to a convenient curtain or other surface for reading by those involved. It is commonly used nowadays to describe a series of future events, based on follow-through from an initial action, the concept being: *If we do* this *...then* that *will happen.* Therefore, a *scenario* is not based on certainty, not really even on probability alone, but on a logical understanding of *what can happen*, that is, on *possibilities*, juggled into *perceived probabilities* by the person preparing the scenario.

The developed statement of a scenario, therefore, requires an understanding of the existing situation and knowledge of how this may impact on future events. Unfortunately, that involves a paradox, one cannot *know,* in the usual meaning of that word, those future events, what must be done is imagine those logical follow-ons from the present (a mental ability strong in some people and almost missing in others), then, present them as knowledge ...even though they have not yet happened ...and may never happen.

The two scenarios, which commonly get attention are the *best case* and the *worst case*; of these the latter is the one on which business executives focus because it is the one to be avoided as much as possible. Two processes have been used to look at worst case possibilities, the Delphi technique to develop what may happen from some starting point, and the Hazop procedure to avoid catastrophic events in hazardous industries. Both serve their purpose; curiously, there is a major difference between them, Delphi uses opinions from separated and independent experts, whereas Hazop uses an assembled committee.

So, now, to this scenario, for examination of leaders' behaviour.

THIS SCENARIO

Briefly, the starting-point in this scenario involves a large, highly-successful-in-the-past, but now old-and-running-down, company, in which the chief executive has decided to try to bring in new life by approving a project, in which people could develop as a new generation of managers, uncontaminated by the general sloth caused by decades of management inbreeding by being located well distant from the head office.

Unfortunately, an accident at the project results in a fatality. Circumstances lead to possible prosecution of the company by government authorities, and civil action by unions acting for the deceased's family against the company and several employees.

On hearing this news, the chief executive (CEO) is immediately concerned about how these actions may affect the project's success, not only its physical completion but the company's rejuvenation, all part of a *worst case scenario*. So, he instructs the company's legal director to prevent any problem from arising, expressed obliquely but firmly.

The legal director follows her boss's directions by contacting the senior partner of the law firm acting for the company

at the project site and passes on the instructions, adding that only he should be involved in the work, no-one else should know of it, and there is no limit to expenses which might be incurred. In reply the lawyer accepts all this and says they had invoice in two parts, one for their work, and one via a separate account for expenses.

THE LEADER-MANAGER CHARACTERS AND THEIR STYLES

As the novel is about a large industrial company we begin this character study at the top, with the chief executive, described as a rather ordinary-looking man, average height, grey-haired, conservatively clothed, able to relax and meditate over a problem but equally able to make decisions and make sure they are followed. His management style, over two groups of directors, before the novel's time, shows as *laissez faire*, they have departments doing what work is to be done, and provided everything is getting done, let them get on with it.

His style-shifting ability shows in his response to three situations. The first was his realising (this is prior to the novel's beginning) that although the work was getting done he felt the firm was stagnating. Outside research confirmed his impression, then, he found a fairly low-level member of one division had put up a suggestion, which looked promising, so the CEO gently indicated his interest. It was opposed by the group of executive directors, where-upon the CEO shifted to a democratic, persuasive, style, which did not change their attitude, so he moved to the autocratic style. By use of indirect threats of possible repercussions the project staggered into existence and eventually progressed.

Such a pattern of behaviour is not uncommon in a CEO; after all, how did he get to that position? By varying his approach from pleasantly chummy to crushingly dictatorial, depending on the situation, of course.

A second is the news of a fatality at the project; news including that the relevant government department could prosecute the firm, and the union might sue the firm and certain employees. His response, through the legal director, was quietly autocratic, just stating: *Get this done*.

The third situation was his learning that the directors were arguing about who would represent head office at the project's commissioning. Here he sat back and did nothing, no interference, no comment, he let them sort it out among themselves, acting even more relaxed than *laissez faire* behaviour would be expected to show. (His only action was entering into a wager with an external associate, placing a bet on which director would win the argument.)

The other principal character in the novel is the project manager, whose suggestion initiated the project. As a graduate engineer from an Australian university, he has some very basic understanding of management, but as an engineer is more task-related than people-related and, thus, for several months concentrates on doing everything possible, personally, to make the project progress. That leads to complaints gossiped among his staff, even between the project engineer and the two students hired for their work-experience semester; all objecting to his behaviour and no-one knowing what to do about it. After all, *he is the boss*. In parallel, he becomes worried about the pressure of his job on himself and equally cannot see how to get out of it, and has the upsetting experience of being severely criticised, very personally, by the project engineer, a long-time friend.

Through those months, the CEO is keeping informed of what has been going on at the project site, partly by formal reports and partly by personal contacts, and he has became worried by the project manager's *one man band* way of working. So he discusses this with his management consultant, who sends a student paper on consequences of various leadership styles to the project manager; reading it causes him to realise what he has been doing, why it has been wrong and what he should do. A few weeks later, his staff complains among themselves that they were working harder but enjoying it more, now their boss had dropped doing their work. However, they agree he is always ready to help when called on.

The project manager had stopped being a *manager* and had become a *leader*.

Does the narrative contain another example of leadership? It does, a member of the maintenance crew, a trades assistant, becomes the leading light in the engineering organisation, bargaining with the manager for a commissioning bonus and other benefits and finally conning his fellow-workers into accepting the management's offer. He shows as a *natural leader*, one who applies leadership without thinking about what he is doing, juggling his act into whatever style is appropriate for the occasion and leading from the bottom rather than from the top. A leopard with indelible spots?

ANALYSIS OF THE LEOPARDS' SPOTS

As a preliminary comment, the author states emphatically this is pure fiction and is not at all in any way based on history. It is simply a follow-through from the starting point: the CEO became worried about the firm's future, started the project, appointed a project manager who was an amateur in such a position, after which we have: *given those events and background, what will follow from that...*

Humans are a strange lot, varying in the gifts allotted to them, and in the education and experiences built on those gifts, hence, in their abilities. The above characters, though fictional here, are present in large numbers in our industrial

society and the two in this narrative differ in age by some thirty years. That numerical difference would at least partly cause their difference in ability to change leopard-spots: *the CEO can change his spots deliberately to meet the occasion's need and does, the project manager cannot see such a need and must be shocked into changing.*

Looking back, one sees the CEO shifted from *laissez faire* to democratic to autocratic, then, back to something easier than *laissez faire*, then, to a mix of democratic (by agreeing to his associate's recommendation) and autocratic (by telling the associate to go ahead with the proposal). All quite deliberate.

Contrary-wise, the project manager was mentally locked into a style, which varied between autocratic and semi-democratic, telling others what to do, while doubling up on them by taking over some, or parts of, their tasks. He was forced to change to a mix between democratic and *laissez faire* by being criticised severely by a long-term friend (which embarrassed both of them) and being given a lecture exposing his management sins.

It is necessary, for anything like a full impression of the project manager's management behaviour, to read the earlier parts of the whole novel, to *hear* the whinges of his staff and the semi-humorous queries of the young students (who are smart enough to see and hear what is going on), to sense the increasing desperation in the project manager's mind and to feel the emotional impact on the project staff.

At this point, readers of this article will nod wisely and remark: yes, that is a good story, and it illustrates human behaviour, but of course it is admitted to be all fiction, and we engineers, managers, employees in industry, live in a real world. What of it?

AND SO NOW IN THE REAL WORLD

There was a time in the last century when critical path planning was very new and just introduced into Australia and a certain factory used it to prepare for a major maintenance exercise. The senior engineer promoted it through his plant engineers and through them to the maintenance foremen, all of whom appeared to accept its value as a planning procedure.

Here one continues the feline analogy; managing that group of foremen was like the proverbial task of herding cats, each of them was a highly competent tradesman and a good manager of the trades workforce, but for the general run of the maintenance work they acted fairly independently within their group, providing a service to production when and where necessary, with little reference to each plant engineer. In general, that made sense and worked well. But when it came to a procedure which would control them - one will see, from this incident, given from personal memory, from being there and participating at the time, that there were difficulties.

On the first day of the two-weeks of work, the foremen disregarded this new-fangled system and went off in the direction they *knew* worked well, aiming to get the short jobs out of the way first, contrary to the official plan, which was to start the long jobs early to give necessary time to ensure their completion. When the senior engineer discovered this (fortunately on the first day), he was more than extremely annoyed, quite understandably, because his standing in the company hinged, to some extent, on his success in introducing this innovation, for which he had needed over-night computer resources, plus some expenses, to prepare the planning. (This was back in the dark ages, before smart PCs, the planning used a clumsy main frame computer nearly a thousand kilometres from the factory.)

He addressed the foremen's morning-tea-break very severely; the term *riot act* was mentioned in chat around the office and his oratory made them change from their ideas to the planned programme.

The exercise fumbled and blundered along and actually was completed reasonably well, all things considered, so after it was finished a post-mortem meeting was held, supposedly not for recriminations, simply to review events. However, the foremen had every expectation the senior engineer would further berate them for their sins. Surprise: early in the meeting he openly apologised for the messy work-organisation, for what happened, for all the upsets and for the way they had to chop and change planning details, saying he felt responsible for the confusion on the first day and the continuance through the two weeks.

There was a stirring among the half-dozen foremen, who had come to the meeting prepared to defend their side of what had happened. After a few seconds one contradicted the senior engineer, admitted his error in not following the planning, and apologised, insisting it was not the senior engineer's fault, it was theirs. One by one the other foremen expressed agreement with that, and the meeting closed after very beneficial discussion and something like a benediction.

Review: the real-world senior engineer had done what the fictional CEO did, he deliberately shifted from the obvious, autocratic condemning of the foremen's actions to the ultra-democratic *mea culpa* of accepting full responsibility. The foremen shifted from being ready to attack as a means of defence to allowing their fur to be stroked and altogether pacified by their manager who had become a leader. In private discussion with immediate staff, the plant engineers, the senior engineer admitted he acted out the part he played quite consciously, quite intentionally. (Incidentally, a year later

the next maintenance exercise used the same planning system and the foremen accepted it, and worked with it, as if it were holy writ.)

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps *panther pardus* cannot change his spots, but the fictional illustration and the real world example suggest some humans can. More precisely, some know how to make a personal, externally-showing, change from one management style to another deliberately, some because the ability is inherent, some because they have learned how and some can cause a change in others. The difficult change is from manager to charismatic leader, and having made such a change the manager must continue to exert task control, appearing to drive the slaves from behind to get the work done, while (figuratively) taking employees by the hand and walking beside them so they accomplish more than they ever believe they can do.

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