

## The further fallacy and paradox of leadership

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**ABSTRACT:** Among the many features of engineering discussed and debated through recent years, *leadership* keeps bobbing up, with many voices proclaiming many different theories, many spoken as facts. Indeed, there is a section of the Institution of Engineers, Australia, which promotes leadership, in conjunction with management. This present author has contributed to the written form of that vocal multitude more than once, the most recent example being an article exploring what was termed the paradox and fallacies of leadership, in which much of what is believed was reviewed, then covered the contradictions in, and the inconsistencies between, those beliefs. Now, further consideration of the topic has revealed another form of both fallacy and paradox, rarely (if ever) mentioned in the literature, to be outlined and explored in this article. What are the implications for engineers? And for the future of the profession? And for engineering education? Suggesting answers to such vital questions, after discussion of the main theme, will be part of the present article.

### INTRODUCTION

In the present article this author has taken, for the fourth time, a contrary-view of an established line of thought, and here we have the second look, in that manner, at a topic which has received almost a revered attitude in the engineering profession - leadership.

But as a beginning, a brief review of this author's writings on the topic, which was first discussed in the author's text on management [1], in a quite straightforward manner, simply presenting it as an important feature of successful management, particularly the management of, and by, engineers. That was followed by an exploration of leaders and followers [2], then by the precursor of this present article [3]. The most recent coverage of leadership is a paper presented this year, which illustrates leadership by referring to W.S. Gilbert's operas [4].

The particular feature of this present article is it is another examination of looking at what is generally accepted, and showing, by looking at fallacious and paradoxical aspects of a topic, that general acceptance may not be quite right and there can be other points worth considering. The previous topics taken were leadership [3], sustainability [5], and managing maintenance [6], and the author cannot resist the desire to similarly expose fallacies and paradoxes in other conventional ways of belief, so more is likely to follow.

There is no thought of apology for these radical, even heretical, attacks on what is generally accepted; they arise from the belief that someone, sometime, has to get up and scream: *There's another way of looking at all this!* There is also no apology for the irony, even humour, injected in this article; leadership is such an important feature of management, and human efforts, generally, that it is hard to be completely serious when discussing it.

### DEFINING THE TERMS

The game played here is being Devil's Advocate, so we should explain what, originally, is a (or the) *Devil's Advocate*? It's the title given to the person appointed to prepare the case *against* someone proposed to be given the honorific *saint*, and that advocate-person has the task of making objections and pointing out defects in the character of the one about to be canonised, as if working for Satan, opposing the angels' case. So, as in the previous paper this author is presenting arguments against those leadership angels by showing there is an accepted feature of leadership which contains both fallacy and paradox.

That brings us to those two words in the title. What is a fallacy? It is a misleading argument, a delusion or error, an unsound method of reasoning. Incidentally, concerning leadership not all the gurus agree on one point or another, there are items where there is disagreement, so there are, probably, several fallacies in the way leadership is being presented.

And what is a paradox? It is a statement contradictory to received and/or accepted opinion; a concept conflicting with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible; something apparently absurd or incredible yet may be true in fact; a tenet contrary to received opinions. Or, being even more pictorial, it is something which, when turned upside down looks as logical as it was upside-right - or almost so, perhaps near enough to promote satirical humour.

## LEADERSHIP FALLACIES

The previous paper covered this inconsiderable detail, so some of the following is taken from that paper, but more, with added details, is given here [3].

The following groups of paired items are presented as fallacies because each of each pair could be true, but not both. The one in which so many of the experts disagree with each other is the *trait-versus-education* argument, some have claimed the ability to lead is born into the individual, others state that it can be acquired by some learning process. Both cannot be true, if taken implicitly, and neither can be proved, so we are presented with whichever the particular guru prefers.

However, the truth could be a combination of the two; perhaps many are born with the mysterious leadership trait and a few happen into situations, which develop that quality into whatever works to make them leaders. Then, only those few progress into leadership roles.

Then, associated with that, there is the question whether the (born or educated) leader brings together a group of people in a situation he (or she) can lead, or whether a state of circumstances arises which demands a leader appear, so he does. (Please note, having acknowledged once the feminine further pronouns will rely on the remark attributed to Disraeli that the male embraces the female).

History has given us events, which appear to distinguish between the forming of a group and the arrival of circumstances; for example, France's condition in the fourteen-hundreds demanded a leader, Joan appeared, and she gathered an army with her - but circumstances also existed. In that example the *egg* seems to have been the need. But consider Germany around 1930: the rise of the Nazi party under Hitler, bringing people together, seems to have been the starting factor - but the people then needed a leader. Which, then, is the real chicken and which, really, is the egg? Or are the historic examples more like a chicken omelette? A mixture of the two? Combined with milk, butter, spices, flavourings? A condition more complex than either egg or chicken?

The related question is whether the leader (when he has appeared) takes over and drags the followers into what he believes is way of tackling what has to be done, or whether the leader must conform to what the led believe is the correct path? The above examples from history have elements of both. One may tend towards concluding that the leader takes over and drags, as a first step, then takes note of what those others want and uses that (but, one would expect, with appropriate modifications); again arguing in favour of an omelette, a mixture of ingredients.

The truth may be a consensus built from all of those, a consensus rarely seen or even hinted. On another hand, perhaps the truth is that every occasion has a fragment of each. Perhaps the leadership action-style can be varied to suit the occasion, or the person addressed, which is illustrated by a personal experience (detailed in the earlier paper), of this author having to supervise in parallel a senior foreman and two junior engineers; this was successful by deferring to, while obliquely directing, the older person, and simply telling the juniors what-and-how to do their work. The ethics of that behaviour have been questioned. But it worked.

## LEADERSHIP PARADOXES

The first paradox was stated by Drucker that managers are *collectively* the leaders of commercial or industrial organisations, but *individually* they are just fellow-employees, from which Drucker then concluded that it is inappropriate to speak of managers as leaders [7].

The paradox related to that is that those at the top rarely *lead* the troops, and that military analogy is very apt, because generals are not usually out in the front line, *leading* per se. There have been exceptions, in the US Civil War many senior officers did front line duty, but the real *leaders* are the sergeants, NCOs generally. The same applies in industry and commerce, those at the top hardly ever take a part which actually *leads* the workforce. The true leader in an engineering department is not the engineering manager, but the foreman who actually directs the work being performed.

Another paradox, confirmed by historical examples, is that the person who takes a leadership role is not always, necessarily, accepted. Churchill was definitely *persona non grata* in the 1930s when he tried to get England to rearm, but by the end of that decade he was surrounded by circumstances which led to his acceptance. (A case arguing for the *circumstances* theory?)

The major paradox of leadership is that despite all the theories produced re leadership, indeed, because we have such a proliferation of theories, no-one really understands what it is all about, what makes a leader, how a leader can take over

and be accepted, why we have leaders. The ultimate paradox is that although we do not understand the phenomenon *it works*, and all we have is the historical perspective of many men and women who have seen the need to act in ways demanded by the times in which they have lived and have accepted whatever they have seen as their task.

#### WHAT DO THE LEADERSHIP EXPERTS SAY?

Reference a few leadership gurus is now needed to indicate their writings have been consulted, and the ones selected here are generally from well back, selected because they provide pithy, sometimes pungent, thoughts on this topic. Beginning with Townsend [8] (not a *leadership expert*, but a generalist and the arch-heretic of management thought), who commented on this present topic with:

*True Leadership must be for the benefit of the followers, not the enrichment of the leaders.*

In an appendix he gave what he saw as the essential qualities a good leader should have: inclusive, humorous, fair, decisive, humble, objective, tough, effective, and patient, with no indication how those qualities might be attained, the implication is a good leader just has them. There is difficulty in finding those Townsend leadership qualities in historical persons, as shown by Byrt [9] quoting Brown [10]:

*When we consider such men as Hitler, Napoleon, the Wesleys, John Knox, and Oliver Cromwell, or such women as Mary Baker Eddy, Queen Elizabeth and Mrs Pankhurst, it becomes absurd to say that a leader should be well-balanced, possess a sense of humour, or a sense of Justice. Some of the most successful leaders in history have been neurotic, insane, epileptic, humourless, narrow-minded, unjust and authoritarian.*

More could be added to that list of historical personalities, which seems to argue against any use of Townsend's checklist.

Owen gave the mystical term *spirit* as the important factor in leadership; a very mystical term indeed [11]. He had an overall aim of showing how leadership can be learned and transmitted, contrary to what is suggested in the first paragraph on the back of Adair's book:

*The art of good leadership is highly prized and demands a keen ability to appraise, understand and inspire both colleagues and subordinates* [12].

His use of the word *art*, as distinct from *science*, suggests leadership is an inherent skill, not something to be learned.

Newman stated ten qualities a leader has, and the first given is vision, moving then through discipline, wisdom, courage, humility, decision maker, develops friendships, tact and diplomacy, executive ability, and inspirational power [13]. It is interesting to compare this list with those of Townsend and Byrt, above, and as Newman is Australian whether his list was intended to cover any of our national political leaders.

Finally, having mentioned this author's use of a leadership technique, which may have been ethically-questionable, one has to turn to Ciulla, whose work is a profound study of the relationship between ethics and leadership [14]. After reading that writer one's understanding of that connection is certainly expanded, but there is so much argument back and forth, it is hard to see whether leaders should behave ethically or should respond more to demands of altruism. Ciulla also relates ethics with morality, which curiously differs from Garrett's first statements that *ethics is not about morals* but agrees with his second, that ethics is *conformity to conventional social rules or the existing moral judgements of men*. As this author outlined in a previous paper, ethics is absorbing in its application to human behaviour - of which leadership is also a similar part [3].

And yet there is more, only a few writers in the personal library have been quoted in the above and, hence, many prominences in the leadership literature have not been mentioned - most of which disagree with each other.

#### FROM THE MANAGEMENT WRITERS

All (well, nearly all seen by this author) management books have a section or chapter on leadership, and again, the number of these is so large only a few can be cited as examples. We accept management writers include leadership because it is related to motivation, and both were entrenched into the management functions by Fayol way back at the beginning of *last* century, so everyone since then has carried the topic forward into nearly every management book.

A thirty-years-ago Australian book (Mukhi *et al* [15]) has a leadership chapter, which begins with two definitions:

*- a large or grand view that catches the broad issue of defining, building and maintaining an organisation's distinctive character and culture.*

- *the interpersonal process by which managers influence employees to accomplish set task goals.*

The first impression one gains is that these writers, like the leadership specialists above, have concentrated on *management leadership*, which appears to be supported by their discussion of *the task-centred leader* and *the people-centred leader*.

Follett, an eminent management writer of the 1920s, reading from Graham [16], did include leadership in her work, and a couple of sentences stand out:

- *we have three kinds of leadership: the leadership of position, the leadership of personality, and the leadership of function.*

*We have heard repeated again and again in the past, Leaders are born, not made. I read the other day Leadership is a capacity that cannot be acquired. I believe that leadership can, in part, be learned.*

That was a nice hedging of the bets. Follett appears to reject the *born leader* concept, but leaves the argument open with *in part*.

One prominent and more recent work, Stoner et al, began by stating *our knowledge of what it takes to be an effective leader is limited* [17]. They then carefully concentrated their text onto *management leadership*, a specialised section of the whole topic, in which, they point out, unequal distribution of power exists. The reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert forms of power are described, with the conclusion that managers can use legitimate power effectively, but leaders use some of the other forms more than managers do.

Many more management books could be cited and from which extracts could be quoted, so as a final word we should take what the grand master had to say in his early writing:

*There is no substitute for leadership. But management cannot create leaders. It can only create conditions under which potential leadership qualities become effective; or it can stifle potential leadership* [18].

Which gives the impression that Drucker, at that time, favoured.

#### AND FROM THE ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT WRITERS

These are a relatively rare, there are nowhere near as many of these as those covering management in general, but recognising that engineering students now meet at least one management subject (in which leadership is sure to get a mention) and that this article is about engineering education, one must look at what these writers present.

One would expect engineering management texts to include leadership, but an early work on engineering management (Cronstedt [19]), while going into considerable detail on what an engineering department does and how it works, has nothing about leadership, not even that word in the index. Even more curious, an Australian book (Samson, [20]) of merely a decade-and-a-half back omits the topic in both the contents and the index, without even a fleeting mention on the three pages on motivation.

Another Australian book, by Kinsky of the same time gives leadership some pages, covering several styles and the pros and cons of some of them, also notes there is a relationship between leadership style and McGregor's X-and-Y theory [21]. A book by an eminent American, Babcock covers similar ground including a section on motivating and leading technical professionals [22]. The one by this present author contains all in those two references plus a specific section on leadership in an engineering organisation [1].

#### NOW TO THE FURTHER FALLACY AND PARADOX

The above several pages have been provided as background, setting the scene for the issue now to be explored.

In what is written about leadership there is an assumption, sometimes explicit, expressed openly, sometimes left to be understood and accepted, sometimes not even hinted because it is part of accepted doctrine, that a leader has followers (in the earlier, unpublished paper, the term *led* was used for those). It is, of course, a reasonable assumption, our language suggests that one may expect a *leader* to have a *follower* (or the plural) attached, somehow or other.

Why should that be so? Looking at history and modern times, yes, it does look that way, but one may ask: is that really so? Is the presence of followers necessary to define a person as a leader? And does someone we might (for some reason) term a leader automatically acquire followers?

We are suggesting, here, that this usual assumption, that followers automatically exist after someone takes a leadership position, is a fallacy.

Let us begin by assessing leadership in a different light. To lead, one must be *out in front*, the exception being W.S. Gilbert's Duke of Plaza-Toro, who *led his regiment from behind, he found it less exciting*. So, here is a suggestion: it is reasonable to see a person *out in front* with some policy, idea, concept, an *invention*, perhaps a physical item, possibly something intangible, which by its existence shows that person is a leader in that (whatever it is) field.

As a starting point in the discussion, consider someone beginning a revolutionary political program. At the moment when that person leaps up and shouts rebellion he is by himself, a voice crying in a political wilderness, leading an idea, a movement, *but with no followers*. Faithful (or otherwise) followers may appear in minutes, as the *big bang* was followed by the expanding universe, but for a brief instant of time the leader of that intangible concept was alone. A leader without followers.

An actual example of a leader without followers for longer than that instant is available from today's real world. In one of Sydney's universities there is a researcher investigating a mental illness. He has been doing that work for a couple of decades and is established as a high-level knowledge-source on the topic. He has general office, administrative, assistance, and, from time to time, work-related assistance from colleagues, post-graduate assistants, visitors from overseas. He is in regular contact with other investigators around Australia and in other countries, all of whom collaborate extensively. He is, definitely *out-in-front*, a leader in this field of human health.

But has he followers? No. He has associates, colleagues, fellow-travellers on the path, the parallel investigators are similar leaders in the work, independent from him, as he is from them. The students come in, do research, are supervised, publish a thesis, and disappear, they might be classed as short-term aides, certainly not *followers*.

This is a known present-day example of a leader without followers, and (however statistically inadequate a sample of one may be) this one example is sufficient to demonstrate the proposition that one can be a leader with no followers.

To further illustrate the above, we do so with another example, given as a purely hypothetical situation in a fictitious tertiary institution. Let us consider in this hypothetical faculty there is a junior academic with the task of teaching a subject not strictly, technically, part of the faculty's direct output but one included in the syllabus for a combination of reasons, some externally imposed, some coming into that general category of *being a good thing*. In this hypothetical situation the subject was traditionally presented in a boring manner not suited to the mind-set of the particular students, hence did not attract student interest. However, this person had an inspiration, which changed the subject's presentation, introduced material, which suited the students and their interests, and developed the subject into a form which not only succeeded in that faculty but also drew in students, taking the subject as an elective, from other faculties.

The obvious question is: is that person a leader? Answer, yes, in developing and teaching that subject. Then we apply the next question: does that person have followers? First, are the students followers? Is that a reasonable question: they find the subject interesting, even enjoyable, they learn from it, so are they followers? Answer: yes, of the *invention*, they follow it eagerly. But of the person leading them through the subject? Answer: yes, because they are following and applying the information given to them. However. Answer: no, because they are not *attached* to the *leader*, and disappear at the end of the semester. Extending this hypothetical illustration, let us say no-one in the faculty recognises this work because it is not attached to the general run of faculty subjects, therefore, there is no *related peer-group* of parallels or followers. Confusing? Answer: yes. But was the junior academic acting in a leadership role? Answer: yes, with respect to subject development and presentation.

So, that example also shows the fallacy of assuming a leader must have followers, and it also shows the paradox that an idea, a concept, an invention, presented by an *invention-leader*, can pick up followers, but not the person generating the idea, concept, invention.

One may argue a similar situation applies to those adhering to many religions, ones founded centuries ago by an individual, who is gone long ago. The originator's concepts are continued today by the provision of policies, ideas, concepts, retained and accepted through those centuries to today.

However, the above hypothetical example is of a much shorter time-frame, perhaps a couple of decades, more or less, limited by many factors such as employment conditions. We need not go further, into details of possible reasons why a peer-group may have rejected the person's work, in an extension of this hypothetical structure we would probably include human factors such as peer-group self-interest and even jealousy, all of which history shows can conflict, often has conflicted, with what is expected of leaders; those factors do exist, and cause problems which leaders should see and with which they should deal. But furthering this hypothetical example we can imagine there could be opacity on both sides, the academic-idea leader may not see what is outside the circle of students around him, and the peer-group may not be aware of what is being performed in the centre of that circle.

The paradox is that there can be followers of the leader's *invention*, but not of the leader personally, which is contrary of the usual tag-along-behind description of followers.

The above gives one very-real-world example of this fallacy and paradox, and one which has been stated as hypothetical but could be, anywhere, real enough. Perhaps it has been. The whole business of leadership is so mysterious there is reasonable certainty many other fallacies and paradoxes could be found if one looks hard enough.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGINEERS

What does this idea of leading-without-followers mean for engineers, experienced people, graduates, students, all of us? According to what is regularly published, we are expected to be leaders, in the profession and among society. All well and good (and trained engineers may often be better than many others who rise to top positions) but must we expect that, by becoming some form of leader, we will automatically attract followers? As pointed out in a previous paper those who are *appointed* as managers become leaders, and followers come automatically from the organisation, the hierarchy system, in which most of us work.

However, as shown above, it is possible to be a leader, of *a something*, rather than of a group of people, and the implication (lesson?) from that is: if one gets an idea which appears to be worthy of development, one should not discard it because one feels alone with the idea. History has shown that many developments have come unbidden from one person's mind; if the idea had been tossed away we would not have, for example, penicillin or stainless steel.

## CONCLUSION

As remarked elsewhere, readers of this article may now believe this author has a low opinion of leadership, whether taken as an entity or as a management function. Not so: the author believes leadership exists and is a vital part of human existence. The proof comes from the many examples in history, the problem is no-one can explain it, all we can do is observe individual cases, analyse each, and conclude: *Well, there you are, that is how leadership works.*

To conclude here, we turn to a rather sceptical, perhaps even cynical, chapter in a work which describes in its title one of the real truths of management; either in part or as a whole management is extremely fuzzy, and of all the management functions leadership is the fuzziest [23]. Recognising that adds to the magic of successful leadership in management, something to which student engineers to look forward to observing, learning, applying and experiencing. But doubtfully understanding.

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