

Living leadership: exploding the myth

Colin Williams

A four-year, international research project during which George Binney, Gerhard Wilke and I lived alongside leaders and their organisations culminated in the publication of our book, *Living Leadership, a practical guide for ordinary heroes*.

We found that many people take for granted that the job of leaders is to transform organisations. After 20 years of “propaganda”, mainly from US business schools, many believe that a leader must be a visionary hero who inspires and aligns others to follow.

When you live with leaders and followers day to day, you see the damage this heroic ideal can do. *Living Leadership* offers our view of the reality of leadership, what works and what doesn't.

For some people, leadership is seen as something you are born with. It is often associated with those who have charisma – an almost magical ability to persuade and inspire others. You either have it or you don't. It's not something you can develop.

We disagree. We found three critical elements in effective leadership.

1. **Leading happens between people** in a particular moment or situation. Leadership is a social process – the result of interactions between and within individuals and groups. To be effective, leaders have to connect with the people around them; it is the quality of the relationships between those designated to lead and those who depend on it that is the vital ingredient.
2. **Leading is shaped by context.** The social and political environment, the business situation and the culture of an organisation shape the type of leadership that is given. Successful leadership is a living thing. It cannot be bottled and reduced to a simple formula. What constitutes leadership is subtle and situational. Because context is so important, what works in one moment with one group of people does not work with another.
3. People are most effective when they bring themselves to leading by coming across to others as real people, real flesh and blood, and not wearing some sort of mask of pretence. They draw on all their humanity, their intelligence, their emotions and their intuition. They remember what they know from all their life experiences and make use of them in the world of work. There isn't a particular type of leader – directive or consultative, outgoing or introverted, visionary or practical – who is more successful than others. Many different styles of leadership are effective.

Leaders are sometimes so burdened with unreal expectations of what they *ought* to be as leaders. It's the imperfections that make leaders valuable; leaders command respect because they are real: passionate, hard-working and committed, but not perfect.

Leadership in our research was not about knowing the answer and inspiring others to follow. It was about the capacity to release the collective intelligence and insight of groups and organisations, helping people to find their own answers.

Many people can and need to be leaders and not just the few. Modern organisations need the many to lead at different times and in different ways.

Leaders and those around them need to 'get connected', to ensure sufficient openness and trust, respect, shared values and perspectives to enable effective joint working, and enough conflict to widen and deepen the exchanges and make real trust possible.

They need to 'get real', learning to work with the relationships, connections, culture and business and social environment that exist. They also need to know themselves, be prepared to get help, and make the best of their own resources and skills.

Charisma can be a wonderful thing, but it is character that is an essential ingredient of leadership. Effective leaders are not necessarily colourful or outgoing, but they are people of substance, who have a moral strength, with views, opinions, feelings and beliefs that do not change from moment to moment.

What is needed is a realistic, down-to-earth rethinking of what leaders can and should do: a willingness to say out loud what people already know at some level. If organisations and their magic are to be maintained, they need ordinary heroes with character and integrity who can serve as role models.



Leader as musician

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 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 it and the courage to put himself 'on the line'.

An extract from *Living Leadership*

Colin Williams is an independent consultant specialising in leadership development. He has worked with Ashridge for over 20 years in a variety of management, consulting and teaching roles. With over ten years' international experience managing operations in the service sector, he completed an MBA at the City University Business School in London in 1987. *Living Leadership: a practical guide for ordinary heroes*, published by Financial Times/Pitman, is available from online and other booksellers.

¹ The research team of 12 people was sponsored by Ashridge in the UK and HEC in France. A research report "Leaders in Transition" was published by Ashridge in 2004