

Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions

By Dr Donna Ladkin

Why should we rethink leadership?

So much that is written about leadership doesn't seem to come close to capturing what the actual experience of leadership is. On close examination, leadership is a collectively enacted phenomenon – not just as a list of attributes typical of 'leaders'. What has often passed as leadership scholarship has, on closer examination, been dedicated to understanding 'leaders'; those individuals who grab our attention amidst what is much more complex. Through turning many taken for granted assumptions about leading and the nature of leadership on their head, I have formed a truly radical view of leadership and the part each of us can play in its enactment.

I have drawn on my experience working in the field of leadership development with leaders working in a broad range of organisational contexts, from the British military to a German company working towards achieving higher levels of ecological sustainability, from leaders working with the Eden Project in Cornwall to American financiers attempting to build ethical corporate cultures. What have I found?

Upturning old ideas of leadership

Taking a radical, questioning view allows us to question old 'truths' about many taken for granted answers to questions such as 'What is charismatic leadership?', 'How do leaders lead change?' and 'Why is vision such an important ingredient for leadership?' For instance, rather than suggesting 'vision' is something a leader must 'come up with' by him or herself, I contend that 'visions' have most meaning when they are connected with followers' ways of understanding themselves and their situations. Visions which work are paradoxically often co-created by leaders and their followers – and the role leaders play is not so much one of generating a vision, but being attentive to the 'vision' which is already inherent in the community they lead.

Similarly if we start by accepting that change, rather than stasis, is the natural state of things, a leader's role in facilitating it becomes very different. Instead of 'initiating' change, as-turnaround-champion, embedded in theories such as Lewin's 'force-field' model of freeze-unfreeze-freeze', leaders must be attentive to the patterns of emerging change, and use their declarative power to help institutionalise those emerging changes which best suit the always unfolding situation. Although this suggests a less heroic role for the leader in change situations, it also offers a more realistic and doable approach to enabling organisations to match the needs of turbulent and uncertain contexts.

Fundamentally, I am suggesting that asking new questions about leadership and leading can result in some startling and counter-intuitive answers particularly in relation to ideas which equate leadership with the formal heads of groups, communities or organisations. In fact, paradoxically, in order for leadership to happen, the designated 'head' of an organisation or group, must sometimes need to step back, and become a follower and allow someone else to 'take the lead'. If leadership is equated only with heroic and all-knowing 'leaders' – it means there's very little role for those of us who are less than omnipotent and all powerful. That kind of thinking supports the adage 'leaders are born and not made'. Yet, for instance, a recent news story tells of an ordinary, Arab American man who took up a leader role to save the lives of people stranded by the flood waters in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck. He might not have thought of himself as a particularly 'leaderly' person, but the context within which he found himself meant that he took up the 'leader' role – and as a result a number of residents of New Orleans are living, rather than being drowned.

What is the significance of Rethinking Leadership?

I developed my ideas on leadership in the wake of a key historical event in which leadership played a star role– the election of Barack Obama as the United States of America's first mixed-race president. This event illustrates two key aspects of leadership which are often overlooked. It is important to consider questions of *context*: would Barack Obama have been elected had Lehman Brothers not have crashed so close to the election, for instance? Also *purpose*: why did

so many Americans rally around Obama's moniker 'Yes We Can'? In coining this slogan, did he capture a purpose which until then had been largely underground, but which crystallized in his articulation of it? Is this the real skill of leading: to capture and name those powerful forces and desires which exist at a tacit level within groups, organisations and communities in a way that enables both identification and mobilisation?

Finally, I suggest that Western cultures' preoccupation with leadership often seems to use leaders as a scapegoat for collective failure, a dance of guilt and blame. However, if leadership is genuinely co-created, contextual and essentially the product rather than the initiator of events, this attitude is unsustainable. Instead, each of us engaged in the 'leadership moment' has responsibility and impact in creating the 'leadership' we desire. Radically rethinking leadership – how it comes about and what each of our role in its enactment is – provides a first step in creating leadership, not just leaders, which will enable us to face the challenges of being humans in the 21st century.

Dr Donna Ladkin is the author of *Rethinking Leadership: a New Look at Leadership Questions*.