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Values in Leadership

Leadership arouses passion. The exercise and even the study of leadership stirs feeling because leadership engages our values. Indeed, the term itself is value-laden. When we call for leadership in our organizations and politics, we call for something we prize. If one asks: “Would you rather be known as a leader or a manager? A follower or a leader?” the response is usually “a leader.” The term leadership involves our self-images and moral codes.

Yet the way we talk about leadership betrays confusion. On one hand, we use the word to denote people and actions of merit. During an election year, we want “a leader” for President, rather than “another politician.” In our organizations, we evaluate managers for their “leadership,” by which we mean a particular constellation of valued abilities. When we look abroad, we fasten the term to people like Gorbachev, Walesa, De Klerk, or Mandela, people we admire for their values, courage, commitment, and skill. On the other hand, we insist that the word leadership is value-free. We say that Pablo Escobar, head of the Medellin drug cartel, was a “leader,” even if we detested his values, because he motivated followers to realize his vision.¹ Our media routinely use the term leader to denote people in authority or people who have a following. We talk about the leader of the gang, the mob, the organization—the person who is given informal or formal authority by others—regardless of the values they represent or the product they play a key part in producing.

We cannot continue to have it both ways. We may like to use the
The word leadership as if it were value-free, particularly in an age of science and mathematics, so that we can describe far-ranging phenomena and people with consistency. Yet when we do so, we ignore the other half of ourselves that in the next breath speaks of leadership as something we desperately need more of. We cannot talk about a crisis in leadership and then say leadership is value-free. Do we merely mean that we have too few people in our midst who can gather a following? Surely, we are not asking for more messiahs of Waco and Jonestown who meet people's needs by offering tempting visions of rapture and sacrifice. The contradiction in our common understanding clouds not only the clarity of our thinking and scholarship; it shapes the quality of leadership we praise, teach, and get.

Understandably, scholars who have studied 'leadership' have tended to side with the value-free connotation of the term because it lends itself more easily to analytic reasoning and empirical examination. But this will not do for them any more than it will do for practitioners of leadership who intervene in organizations and communities everyday. Rigor in social science does not require that we ignore values; it simply requires being explicit about the values we study. There is no neutral ground from which to construct notions and theories of leadership because leadership terms, loaded with emotional content, carry with them implicit norms and values. For example, when we equate leadership with holding high office or exerting great influence, we reinforce a tendency to value station and power. We are not simply studying or using power; we unwittingly communicate that power has intrinsic worth.

We have to take sides. When we teach, write about, and model the exercise of leadership, we inevitably support or challenge people's conceptions of themselves, their roles, and most importantly their ideas about how social systems make progress on problems. Leadership is a normative concept because implicit in people's notions of leadership are images of a social contract. Imagine the differences in behavior when people operate with the idea that "leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader's vision" versus "leadership means influencing the community to face its problems." In the first instance, influence is the mark of leadership; a leader gets people to accept his vision, and communities address problems by looking to him. If something goes wrong, the fault lies with the
In the second, progress on problems is the measure of leadership; leaders mobilize people to face problems, and communities make progress on problems because leaders challenge and help them do so. If something goes wrong, the fault lies with both leaders and the community.

This second image of leadership—mobilizing people to tackle tough problems—is the image at the heart of this book. This conception builds upon, yet differs from, the culturally dominant views. For example, in popular conceptions of politics, leadership generally refers to the exercise of influence: the leader stands out in front—usually in high office—influencing others. The person may also be the most influential member of a popular movement operating with little if any formal authority, such as Lech Walesa or the Ayatollah Khomeini (before they took political office).

In business, we see an evolution of the concept of leadership. For decades, the term leadership referred to the people who hold top management positions and the functions they serve. In our common usage, it still does. Recently, however, business people have drawn a distinction between leadership and management, and exercising leadership has also come to mean providing a vision and influencing others to realize it through noncoercive means.6

In the military, the term leadership commonly refers to people in positions of command, who show the way. Perhaps because warfare has played a central role historically in the development of our conceptions of leadership and authority, it is not surprising that the ancient linguistic root of the word “to lead” means “to go forth, die.”7 In our time, leadership in the military aims to draw forth a person’s highest qualities, by influence more than coercion. “Be all that you can be” implies preparation based on the potential that resides in the enlistees when they enter. In the final test, however, the troops achieve the goals prescribed by the leaders in command.8

In biology, leadership is the activity of flying at the front of a flock of geese, or maintaining order in social relations and food gathering among primates. The leader has a particular set of physical attributes (big, colorful, fast, assertive). The leader functions as a focal point of attention by which the rest of the group instinctively organizes itself. Leadership is equated with prominence and dominance.

In horse racing, a field some would say bears a resemblance to
politics, leading simply means being out in front. The jockey of the lead horse is leading nobody, except perhaps unintentionally to the extent that other jockeys set strategy and strive harder to overtake him.

There seem to be two common denominators of these various views: station and influence. Hence, many scholarly approaches to the study of leadership during the last two hundred years focus on the phenomena of prominent and influential people. Theorists ask the following important questions: How and why do particular individuals gain power in an organization or society? What are their personal characteristics? What functions do they serve? How do they realize their vision? How do they move history, or does history move them? What motivates them and how do they motivate others?

Hidden Values in Theories of Leadership

Perhaps the first theory of leadership—and the one that continues to be entrenched in American culture—emerged from the nineteenth-century notion that history is the story of great men and their impact on society. (Women were not even considered candidates for greatness.) Thomas Carlyle crystallized this view in his 1841 volume On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History. Although various scientific studies discount the idea, this trait approach continues to set the terms of popular debate. Indeed, it saw a revival during the 1980s. Based on this view, trait theorists since Carlyle have examined the personality characteristics of “great men,” positing that the rise to power is rooted in a “heroic” set of personal talents, skills, or physical characteristics. As Sidney Hook described in The Hero in History (1943), some men are eventful, while others are event-making.

In reaction to the great-man theory of history, situationalists argued that history is much more than the effects of these men on their time. Indeed, social theorists like Herbert Spencer (1884) suggested that the times produce the person and not the other way around. In a sense, situationalists were not interested in leadership per se. “Historymakers” were interesting because they stood at the vortex of powerful political and social forces, which themselves were of interest. Thus, the more or less contemporaneous emergence of the United
States' first great leaders—Jefferson, Washington, Adams, Madison, Hamilton, Monroe, Benjamin Franklin—is attributed not to a demographic fluke but to the extraordinary times in which these men lived. Instead of asserting that all of them shared a common set of traits, situationalists suggest that the times called forth an assortment of men with various talents and leadership styles. Indeed, many of them performed marvelously in some jobs but quite poorly in others. Thus, “What an individual actually does when acting as a leader is in large part dependent upon characteristics of the situation in which he functions.”

Beginning in the 1950s, theorists began (not surprisingly) to synthesize the trait approach with the situationalist view. Empirical studies had begun to show that no single constellation of traits was associated with leadership. Although this finding did not negate the idea that individuals “make” history, it did suggest that different situations demand different personalities and call for different behaviors. Primary among these synthetic approaches is contingency theory, which posits that the appropriate style of leadership is contingent on the requirements of the particular situation. For example, some situations require controlling or autocratic behavior and others participative or democratic behavior.

The field of inquiry soon expanded into the specific interactions between leaders and followers—the transactions by which an individual gains influence and sustains it over time. The process is based on reciprocity. Leaders not only influence followers but are under their influence as well. A leader earns influence by adjusting to the expectations of followers. In one variant of the transactional approach, the leader reaps the benefits of status and influence in exchange for reducing uncertainty and providing followers with a basis for action. In another variant, bargaining and persuasion are the essence of political power, requiring a keen understanding of the interests of various stakeholders, both professional and public.

Each of these theories is generally considered to be value-free, but in fact their values are simply hidden. The great-man or trait approach places value on the historymaker, the person with extraordinary influence. Although the approach does not specify in what direction influence must be wielded to constitute leadership, the very suggestion that the mark of a great man is his historical impact on
society gives us a particular perspective on greatness. Placing Hitler in the same general category as Gandhi or Lincoln does not render the theory value-free. On the contrary, it simply leaves its central value—influence—implicit. 21

The situational approach, ironically, does something similar. It departs radically from the great-man view by suggesting that certain people emerge to prominence because the times and social forces call them forth. Yet leaders are still assumed to be those people who gain prominence in society. The people that a trait theorist would select to study from history, the situational theorist would select as well.

Contingency theory, synthesizing the great-man and situational approaches, also began with a value-free image of itself. It examines which decisionmaking style fits which situational contingency in order for the decisionmaker to maintain control of the process. Sometimes a directive, task-oriented style is the most effective, and at other times a participative, relationship-oriented style is required. Yet even in this more specific rendition of the traditional view, the mark of leadership is still influence, or control. 22

Advocates of transactional approaches, focusing on how influence is gained and maintained, also see themselves as value-neutral. Although they describe elegantly the relational dynamics of influence, they do not evaluate the purpose to which influence is put or the way purposes are derived. By stating that the mark of leadership is influence over outcomes, these theorists unwittingly enter the value realm. Leadership-as-influence implicitly promotes influence as an orienting value, perpetuating a confusion between means and ends. 23

These four general approaches attempt to define leadership objectively, without making value judgments. When defining leadership in terms of prominence, authority, and influence, however, these theories introduce value-biases implicitly without declaring their introduction and without arguing for the necessity of the values introduced. 24 From a research point of view, this presents no real problem. Indeed, it simplifies the analytic task. The problem emerges when we communicate and model these descriptions as “leadership” because “leadership” in many cultures is a normative idea—it represents a set of orienting values, as do words like “hero” and “champion.” 25 If we leave the value implications of our teaching and practice unaddressed, we encourage people, perhaps unwittingly, to
aspire to great influence or high office, regardless of what they do there. We would be on safer ground were we to discard the loaded term leadership altogether and simply describe the dynamics of prominence, power, influence, and historical causation.

Although these theories were designed primarily for value-free description and analysis, they still shed light on how to think about practice. For example, the trait theorists encourage us to believe that individuals can indeed make a difference. No activist can operate without that assumption. Furthermore, the decades of scholarship devoted to sifting and analyzing generic skills provide us with some basis to define the goals of leadership education. The situational approach directs us toward examining how the activity of leadership differs depending on the context. Coupled with the contingency approach, it tells us that the task of contextual diagnosis is central to leadership. In addition, it provides a host of variables to consider in analyzing different situations and the style of leadership that might apply. This will be critical to those who lead. For example, contingency theory frames the key question: Which situations call for authoritarian behavior and which demand "democratic" processes?

The transactional theorists contribute the basic idea that authority consists of reciprocal relationships: people in authority influence constituents, but constituents also influence them. We forget this at our peril.

**Toward a Prescriptive Concept of Leadership**

In this study I will use four criteria to develop a definition of leadership that takes values into account. First, the definition must sufficiently resemble current cultural assumptions so that, when feasible, one's normal understanding of what it means to lead will apply. Second, the definition should be practical, so that practitioners can make use of it. Third, it should point toward socially useful activities. Finally, the concept should offer a broad definition of social usefulness.

How might we go about defining the term leadership in a way that employs our current knowledge, and the values associated with it? Leadership, which has long been linked to the exercise of authority or influence, usually suggests playing a prominent and coordinat-
ing role in an organization or society. To capture these uses of the term in a definition, we can use the word “mobilize,” which connotes motivating, organizing, orienting, and focusing attention.

Rather than define leadership either as a position of authority in a social structure or as a personal set of characteristics, we may find it a great deal more useful to define leadership as an activity.29 This allows for leadership from multiple positions in a social structure. A President and a clerk can both lead. It also allows for the use of a variety of abilities depending on the demands of the culture and situation. Personal abilities are resources for leadership applied differently in different contexts. As we know, at times they are not applied at all. Many people never exercise leadership, even though they have the personal qualities we might commonly associate with it.30 By unhinging leadership from personality traits, we permit observations of the many different ways in which people exercise plenty of leadership everyday without “being leaders.”

The common personalistic orientation to the term leadership, with its assumption that “leaders are born and not made,” is quite dangerous. It fosters both self-delusion and irresponsibility. For those who consider themselves “born leaders,” free of an orienting philosophy and strategy of leadership, their grandiosity is a set-up for a rude awakening and for blindly doing damage. Minimally, they can waste the time and effort of a community on projects that go, if not over a cliff, then at least in circles.31 Conversely, those who consider themselves “not leaders” escape responsibility for taking action, or for learning how to take action, when they see the need. In the face of critical problems, they say, “I’m not a leader, what can I do?”32

So, we ought to focus on leadership as an activity—the activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something. But what is the socially useful something? What mode of leadership is likely to generate socially useful outcomes? Several approaches to these questions might work. We could imagine that a leader is more likely to produce socially useful outcomes by setting goals that meet the needs of both the leader and followers.33 This has the benefit of distinguishing leadership from merely “getting people to do what you want them to do.” Leadership is more than influence.

Even so, setting a goal to meet the needs of the community may give no definition of what those needs are. If a leader personally
wants to turn away from the difficulty of problems, and so do his constituents, does he exercise leadership by coming up with a fake remedy?

To address this problem, the leadership theorist James MacGregor Burns suggested that socially useful goals not only have to meet the needs of followers, they also should elevate followers to a higher moral level. Calling this transformational leadership, he posits that people begin with the need for survival and security, and once those needs are met, concern themselves with "higher" needs like affection, belonging, the common good, or serving others. This approach has the benefit of provoking discussion about how to construct a hierarchy of orienting values. However, a hierarchy that would apply across cultures and organizational settings risks either being so general as to be impractical or so specific as to be culturally imperialistic in its application.

We might also say that leadership has a higher probability of producing socially useful results when defined in terms of legitimate authority, with legitimacy based on a set of procedures by which power is conferred from the many to the few. This view is attractive because we might stop glorifying usurpations of power as leadership. But by restraining the exercise of leadership to legitimate authority, we also leave no room for leadership that challenges the legitimacy of authority or the system of authorization itself. No doubt, there are risks to freeing leadership from its moorings of legitimate authority. To take one celebrated case, perhaps we risk encouraging committed zealots like Oliver North. Yet we also face an important possibility: social progress may require that someone push the system to its limit. Perhaps Andrei Sakharov served such a role in the democratization of the former Soviet Union. Hence, a person who leads may have to risk his moral state, and not just his health and job, to protect his moral state. Defining leadership in terms of legitimate authority excludes those who faced moral doubt and deep regret by defying authority. Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr., Margaret Sanger, and Mohandas Gandhi, to name a few, risked social disaster by unleashing uncontrollable social forces.

Business schools and schools of management commonly define leadership and its usefulness with respect to organizational effective-
ness. Effectiveness means reaching viable decisions that implement the goals of the organization. This definition has the benefit of being generally applicable, but it provides no real guide to determine the nature or formation of those goals. Which goals should we pursue? What constitutes effectiveness in addition to the ability to generate profits? From the perspective of a town official viewing a local corporation, effectiveness at implementation seems an insufficient criterion. A chemical plant may be quite effective at earning a profit while it dangerously pollutes the local water supply. We are left with the question: Effective at what?

This study examines the usefulness of viewing leadership in terms of adaptive work. Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior. The exposure and orchestration of conflict—internal contradictions—within individuals and constituencies provide the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways.

In this view, getting people to clarify what matters most, in what balance, with what trade-offs, becomes a central task. In the case of a local industry that pollutes the river, people want clean water, but they also want jobs. Community and company interests frequently overlap and clash, with conflicts taking place not only among factions but also within the lives of individual citizens who themselves may have competing needs. Leadership requires orchestrating these conflicts among and within the interested parties, and not just between the members and formal shareholders of the organization. Who should play a part in the deliberations is not a given, but is itself a critical strategic question. Strategy begins with asking: Which stakeholders have to adjust their ways to make progress on this problem? How can one sequence the issues or strengthen the bonds that join the stakeholders together as a community of interests so that they withstand the stresses of problem-solving?

To clarify a complex situation such as this requires multiple vantage points, each of which adds a piece to the puzzle. Just as clarifying a vision demands reality testing, reality testing is not a value-free process. Values are shaped and refined by rubbing against real problems, and people interpret their problems according to the
values they hold. Different values shed light on the different opportunities and facets of a situation. The implication is important: the inclusion of competing value perspectives may be essential to adaptive success. In the long run, an industrial polluter will fail if it neglects the interests of its community. Given the spread of environmental values, it may not always be able to move across borders. Conversely, the community may lose its economic base if it neglects the interests of its industry.

The point here is to provide a guide to goal formation and strategy. In selecting adaptive work as a guide, one considers not only the values that the goal represents, but also the goal's ability to mobilize people to face, rather than avoid, tough realities and conflicts. The hardest and most valuable task of leadership may be advancing goals and designing strategy that promote adaptive work.39

Does this forsake the image of leadership as a visionary activity? Not at all. It places emphasis on the act of giving clarity and articulation to a community's guiding values. Neither providing a map for the future that disregards value conflicts nor providing an easy way that neglects the facts will suffice for leadership.40 Guiding values are interpreted in the context of problems demanding definition and action.41 People discover and respond to the future as much as they plan it. Those who lead have to learn from events and take advantage of the unplanned opportunities that events uncover.42 They have to improvise. In the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt called for "bold, persistent experimentation." As he put it, "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."43

As an example to compare these frames of reference, we can use the case of Roosevelt's adversary, Adolf Hitler. When influence alone defines leadership, Hitler qualifies as an authentic and successful leader: he mobilized a nation to follow his vision. Indeed, he inspired millions of people to organize their lives by his word. Even with the added criterion that goals have to meet the needs of both leader and follower, we would say that Hitler led. His many followers in Germany shared his goals. He was not simply forcing his sentiments and views on everyone. He reached office, in part, by articulating the pains and hopes of many people.

Furthermore, by the standard of organizational effectiveness,
Hitler exercised formidable leadership. Within hundreds of specific decisionmaking instances, Hitler succeeded in developing the effectiveness of German organizations. He set the goal of restoring the German economy, and for a period of time he succeeded.

If we assume that leadership must not only meet the needs of followers but also must elevate them, we render a different judgment. Hitler wielded power, but he did not lead. He played to people's basest needs and fears. If he inspired people toward the common good of Germany, it was the good of a truncated and exclusive society feeding off others. By the standard of legitimate authority, Hitler also does not qualify as a leader. Elected once by a plurality of Germans in 1933, he destroyed the nascent democratic political apparatus and maintained his political dominance through terror.

By the criterion of adaptive work used here, we would also say that Hitler failed to exercise leadership. Although dramatically mobilizing his society, both socially and economically, he did so primarily in the direction of avoiding tough realities. By providing illusions of grandeur, internal scapegoats, and external enemies, Hitler misdiagnosed Germany's ills and brought his nation to disaster. He exercised leadership no more than a charlatan practices medicine when providing fake remedies.

There are several advantages to viewing leadership in terms of adaptive work. First, it points to the pivotal importance of reality testing in producing socially useful outcomes—the process of weighing one interpretation of a problem and its sources of evidence against others. Without this process, problem definitions fail to model the situation causing distress. Conceptions of leadership that do not value reality testing encourage people to realize their vision, however faulty their sight. Thus, Hitler's error was diagnostic as well as moral. To produce adaptive work, a vision must track the contours of reality; it has to have accuracy, and not simply imagination and appeal.

In addition, focusing on adaptive work allows us to evaluate leadership in process rather than wait until the outcome is clear. We could have spotted Hitler's faulty reality testing early on. He gave plenty of clues. His election in 1933 based on a platform of exaltation and scapegoating would have made us question the health of the problem-solving apparatus in the German society, notwithstanding-
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...ing the appearance of legitimate authority flowing from a democratic election. We would not have had to wait for the results of his efforts.

Furthermore, in using the criterion of adaptive work, we need not impose our own hierarchy of human needs on the genuinely expressed needs of Germany at the time. In analyzing a community's response to hard realities, we would ask the following questions: Are its members testing their views of the problem against competing views within the community or are they defensively sticking to a particular perspective and suppressing others? Are people testing seriously the relationship between means and ends? Are conflicts over values and the morality of various means open to examination? Are policies analyzed and evaluated to distinguish fact from fiction?

In Nazi Germany, Hitler suppressed the competition among German perspectives. He established a norm of conformity that excluded the views that could test his vision of Germany's problems. Hence, Germany could not test the hypothetical relationship between current economic conditions and the citizenship of Jews. How establishing a "land free of Jews" would restore Germany was not subject to open scrutiny, either as a technical or moral prescription. Even in military operations, German policymakers lost the flexibility to respond to changed conditions. The ideal of will produced decisions that disregarded complex circumstances.

Working within the society's own frame of reference becomes particularly important in cases less obvious than Nazi Germany. For example, an international development consultant might plan a series of interventions into a foreign culture. To assess that culture's objectives according to her own values may be dangerous. But she can help assess the quality of work without imposing her beliefs. She can evaluate the extent to which the culture fails to address the problems arising from the culture's own values and purposes. And perhaps more significantly if she has any leverage, she may be able to help or push the society to do the hard work of clarifying its competing values and purposes, and of facing the painful trade-offs and adjustments required to narrow the gap between current conditions and purposes. If the society bans certain parties, disenfranchises segments of the population, or uses torture and repression, what value perspective is obliterated among those being silenced? What aspects of reality that they see are being kept hidden? What might
she do to encourage the factions of the culture to speed their own change of attitudes, habits, and beliefs?

Because leadership affects many lives, the concept we use must be spacious. It has to allow for the values of various cultures and organizations. It cannot be imperialistic. Yet we cannot beg the issue altogether by saying that leadership is value-free and define it simply in terms of its instruments (influence, formal powers, prominence) or personal resources (skills, bearing, temperament). Those who listen to us do more with what we say. They turn instruments and resources into values that orient their professional lives.

In this study, leadership is oriented by the task of doing adaptive work. As we shall see, influence and authority are primary factors in doing adaptive work, but they also bring constraints. They are instruments and not ends. Tackling tough problems—problems that often require an evolution of values—is the end of leadership; getting that work done is its essence.

Our societies and organizations clearly need leadership in the sense developed here. We are facing major adaptive challenges. We need a view of leadership that provides a practical orientation so that we can evaluate events and action in process, without waiting for outcomes. We also need a governor on our tendencies to become arrogant and grandiose in our visions, to flee from harsh realities and the dailyness of leadership. Terms like transformational leadership fuel such grandiosity. Furthermore, as we shall see, a strategy of leadership to accomplish adaptive work accounts for several conditions and values that are consonant with the demands of a democratic society. In addition to reality testing, these include respecting conflict, negotiation, and a diversity of views within a community; increasing community cohesion; developing norms of responsibility-taking, learning, and innovation; and keeping social distress within a bearable range.

Yet this concept of leadership has potential drawbacks that require investigation. The word adaptation too readily connotes coping, as if one must passively submit to an unbending reality. It may often be true that there are unbending realities that we should face rather than avoid, but since much of social reality is a product of social arrangements, and physical reality has become increasingly amenable to technological impact, there is obviously a great deal of plasticity
to many of our realities, and we would do ourselves a disservice to adopt a coping relationship to them. In addition, because adaptation is a metaphor from biology where the objective is survival, leadership as "activity to mobilize adaptation" may connote an overemphasis on survival. Clearly, we have a host of quite precious values—liberty, equality, human welfare, justice, and community—for which we take risks, and a concept of adaptation applied to human organizations and societies must account for these squarely. With these concerns in mind, we turn to a deeper examination of adaptive work.