

INTRODUCTION

Outlines of a Usefully Different Leadership

Bernardo, a mid-level executive in a components distribution business, wants his company to be more innovative, a view apparently shared by many employees. Despite the company's internal and external communications referring to its "commitment to innovation," a recent survey has revealed that this is not the reality many employees see. Bernardo is thinking of raising with top executives the gap between the company's claims and employee perceptions—but he is hesitant. "I don't know that they want to deal with this issue," he says. "In the past I definitely wouldn't have spoken up, as I haven't seen myself as a leader. These days I don't dwell on the leader question. I'm more concerned with building my intervention skills."

Alice, a high school assistant principal, is seeking to bring about a change in the school's teaching and learning culture, to better enable the learning needs of all students to be met. She has long regarded herself as a capable leader. "I've usually been able to set a direction," she says, "and influence and motivate others to come with me. But it's not working now. Some of the teachers openly oppose the new direction. These people are stuck in a time warp. And I have to deal with this on top of the pressures involved in overseeing the day-to-day running of the school."

Bernardo and Alice are both dealing with what I am calling "contentious problems." These are essentially problems that can be viewed from different perspectives: there is no single answer or solution to be revealed. Such problems have a Janus-like (two-headed) character. To gain a sense of this image, you might imagine an ancient statue, a statue with one head facing to your left and one head to your right.

The left-facing head represents the more overt, explicit aspects of a contentious problem, meaning the things that are tangible, documented, or observable. With Alice's school change problem, some of the explicit aspects are the arguments—perhaps expressed with passion and intensity—that Alice and the teachers are putting forward, and the "evidence" each side is drawing on to support those arguments. Switching to Bernardo's innovation problem, explicit aspects here include the actual results from the employee survey and stated company values and policies relating to innovation.

The right-facing head of the statue represents those aspects of a contentious problem that are more subtle, covert, or implicit. We can think of this head as

covered with a veil or a shroud—the “head of hidden intelligence.” It stands for what is in people’s hearts and minds about the problem but which has not been made explicit. In Bernardo’s innovation case, it appears the gap between the company’s stated commitment to innovation and the survey results has not been discussed openly yet. Because the topic appears to have been avoided, we might well imagine that at least some members of the executive group have privately-held thoughts and feelings on this matter. In Alice’s case, it is also likely that much is unspoken. Alice probably has in mind strategies about how she intends to achieve change that she has not yet shared. Equally, the teachers may have assumptions, concerns, and fears that they have not given voice to—or perhaps have not even recognized themselves.

Commonly, in dealing with contentious problems, we allow ourselves to be preoccupied with the left-sided head. We focus on the more tangible, concrete aspects of the problem. We argue about the “facts” and those more solid aspects as if the other head did not exist. The veil remains firmly in place. Yet, if we can lift that veil somewhat, we potentially tap into huge resources that could be helpful in dealing with the problem: deep but implicit assumptions; unvoiced concerns and feelings; and knowledge that people hold, but keep to themselves. Most likely the teachers in Alice’s school—or the employees in Bernardo’s company—would have much to contribute to working through contentious problems in their respective organizations, but their contribution often goes unsolicited.

A critical challenge for leadership is to draw out these latent mental resources, so that they may be examined, interpreted, and integrated—allowing that some contention may remain—to achieve joint understandings about present realities and preferred futures, and to generate energy for change. In effect, this requires tapping into and working with the intelligence reflected by both heads of the statue. But, our dominant views of leadership hold us back.

Why We Need a Different View of Leadership

Conventional approaches to leadership are of limited usefulness in dealing with contentious problems. This is because the most widely held assumptions underpinning these approaches are outdated, at best. Four of the most prevalent assumptions are:

1. Leadership is equivalent to leaders.
2. Leadership is exclusively the function of those in positions of considerable authority.
3. Leadership is based in influence processes.
4. Little is to be gained by trying to differentiate leadership and management.

These assumptions are not necessarily without some foundation.¹ The problem is that uncritical reliance upon them distorts our understanding of leadership and limits the possibilities we can see. Ultimately, this diminishes the potential for leadership to achieve results—particularly with respect to contentious problems. For example:

Leadership is Equivalent to Leaders Leadership and leaders are commonly treated as largely interchangeable terms: leaders perform leadership, and leadership is performed by leaders. We attach leadership to some people, who—because of their perceived personal qualities or attributes—are regarded as leaders. A consequence is that the potential leadership contribution of “non-leaders” or “followers” is denied. Consider this example: a small, specialist financial advisory company had four directors. Three of the four said to the fourth, who was quieter and more reserved than the others, “We don’t see you as a leader.” Yet, depending on how we frame our understanding of leadership, that fourth director might be able to make a significant contribution, even if he does not fit conventional images (or, more strictly, his colleagues’ images) of a leader. Focusing on the “who” of leadership distracts us from the “what.” As long as we focus on which *people* are leaders or not, we can be blinded from looking at the *processes* of leadership, in terms of the kinds of actions that will help us deal most productively with contentious problems.

Leadership is Exclusively the Function of those in Positions of Considerable Authority One consequence of this assumption is that the actions of top executives—for instance, in strategy-making, policy review and performance monitoring—can be taken as representing leadership, without any critical appraisal of what those actions involve. Yet, the people in the highest-ranking roles are often remote from the issues, and may have little appreciation of the contentious matters. People who are closer to the action may have a better appreciation of specific aspects of the problem but, insofar as they have lesser or little authority, they tend not to see leadership contributions as theirs to make. The intention here is not to discount the importance of leadership at the top, but to foster fresh thinking and action in relation to leadership at *all* levels of the hierarchy.

Leadership is Primarily an Influence Process This notion underpins “transformational leadership,” currently a dominant paradigm. Ideally, the transformational leader assesses the problem to be dealt with, develops a vision representing the problem overcome, and communicates the vision so as to inspire and enthuse others to pursue the vision. Undoubtedly, some people demonstrate transformational qualities and there are numerous success stories. But often the promise remains unfulfilled, as Alice is experiencing in her efforts to lead change in the school.

The transformational leader may be unable to gauge accurately what others think and feel, but do not openly state about the problem. Perhaps “followers” are not convinced of either the vision’s desirability or that it can be achieved. They may remain silent about their reservations so as to appear loyal and committed. Transformational leadership approaches have little to offer in dealing with the hidden dimension of contentious problems—what people are potentially aware of but do not talk about—other than processes for better persuading others to go along with the leader’s view.

Little is to be Gained from Trying to Separate Leadership and Management This fourth assumption reflects the confusion implicit in the other assumptions. If we neglect to differentiate leadership and management, we may believe we are exercising leadership when we are actually undertaking management actions, all the while wondering why we are making little progress.

A key proposition in this book is that management processes are *distinctly different* from leadership processes, with that distinction being not sufficiently well understood. This confusion hinders the resolution of contentious problems. I contend that most actions taken in relation to contentious problems are made in the management mode, even though the language of leadership is frequently invoked.

Management processes are important and useful with contentious problems in particular kinds of circumstances, such as when the need is to contain or limit the problem or to be able to demonstrate that action is being taken. As well, management and leadership processes can beneficially complement one another in dealing with such problems. Where management processes are not well suited, however, is in drawing out and examining the differing perceptions surrounding contentious problems. For that, we need leadership.

A Usefully Different Perspective

Dealing with contentious problems productively requires leadership of a distinct kind: leadership that is grounded in continuous learning. This kind of leadership is process-focused and highly relational. Why? Overcoming contentious problems requires nurturing the ability of groups to candidly evaluate their current realities, to come to a shared assessment, and then to create a shared vision of a desired future. In so doing, we harness collective energy, which is the only way to bring about—and sustain—the deep changes that these problems signify.

To that end, this book puts forward a new vision of leadership, with the following defining characteristics:

- Instead of focusing on the leader as a person, this distinct form accentuates leadership *processes*. These processes involve group members in assessing current realities, clarifying a common purpose and vision, and harnessing energy to bring the vision into being. This work takes place over time, through individuals taking certain kinds of actions—we shall use the term, “interventions”—which contribute to the group’s leadership work. To intentionally undertake such interventions is to act “in the leadership mode.”
- Rather than tying leadership to authority, our distinct form of leadership treats authority as only a background factor, not as a defining feature. An implication is that, in a group setting, anyone in the group can potentially make leadership interventions.
- In place of reliance on influence processes, the emphasis in this type of leadership is on *learning* processes. Learning here refers to processes of joint sense-making, in which people think together to formulate integrated understandings—while also remaining open to reviewing and, if necessary, changing, their own assumptions and conclusions. Reflecting the importance of learning, I refer to this as *learning-centered leadership* (sometimes abbreviating it to *learning-leadership*).
- In preference to setting aside the relationship between leadership and management as unhelpful or too difficult, learning-centered leadership is positioned specifically in relation to management action. Choices between leadership and management interventions are a central concern in this view of leadership. This reflects that, in most organizations, management processes dominate—notwithstanding that leadership is a much talked-about topic.

Fortunately, this form of leadership is not just a theoretical construct. It has highly practical application and is being practiced by some. But this form is neither well known, nor well established. This state of affairs reflects the dominance of those outdated assumptions about leaders, authority, influence, and the leadership-management relationship. As long as we look at leadership through the lens of these assumptions, our newly identified form remains largely invisible. Envisioning this form requires setting these assumptions to one side. This is not a matter of rejecting the assumptions altogether. But, insofar as we wish to study or apply the alternative form, we must step clear of these long-held beliefs.

Practical Benefits

What might be the practical benefits of approaching our understanding of leadership from such a different direction?

- We increase the potential of gaining contributions to leadership work from many people who, like Bernardo, do not see themselves as fitting the mold of a conventional leader, or do not occupy positions of elevated authority. Potentially, leadership activity draws upon more of the talent that exists within a group or organization.
- We increase the potential for bringing to the surface, scrutinizing, and integrating more of what stakeholders can potentially contribute, but which now remains implicit or hidden. Applying learning-centered leadership processes might, for instance, enable Alice to work with the teachers to build a joint understanding of the problem and a common vision for overcoming it. In so doing, they would elicit energy for change.
- We make better, more informed choices about how to act. If we have a clear concept of the leadership-management distinction, we are better positioned to choose the intervention option that best fits particular situations. Understanding leadership and management as distinct forms of activity assists us to intentionally interweave the two forms to good effect—as well as to assess the relative attention we give to each over time, and to act on what we find.

All of these are key to working effectively with contentious problems, as this book will make clear.

The Book's Purpose

This book has three purposes:

- To bring to light a view of leadership grounded in processes of joint and individual learning rather than influence (or authority), and which is distinct from management processes;
- To articulate and demonstrate the attitudes and practices which can help us bring this view of leadership into the mainstream; and
- To equip individual readers with frameworks and tools for use in developing their own capability in learning-centered leadership.

The concepts, practices and tools herein are discussed in relation to leadership in organizational settings, including business, governmental agencies, and schools. As to the kinds of problems for which the processes described here may be useful, they include:

- Change-related issues characterized by contending viewpoints between stakeholders or apparent resistance to change;

- Situations in which one needs to confront people in higher-ranking roles about difficult issues;
- Instances of poor group or individual performance where there appears to be an attitudinal dimension; and
- Problems within and between groups and organizations.

Some might ask, what is really new here? After all, other writers on leadership have discussed, variously, the preoccupation with the leader in the leadership literature, the confusion between leadership and authority, leadership as an influence process, and the leadership–management relationship. The distinctive edge in this book is to frame a conventional view of leadership as grounded in particular assumptions regarding each and all four of these elements, and to put forward an alternative form that springs from a different set of premises, together with a set of frameworks and tools to support people in enacting this different form.

Overview of IN THE LEADERSHIP MODE

PART ONE Foundations

The five chapters of Part 1 outline the essential concepts that characterize this distinct form of leadership, and set it apart from a management orientation. Like the footings of a house, these concepts are the essential foundational building blocks.

Chapter 1 looks at the prevailing contemporary thinking about leadership and leaders, and the authority and influence processes that tend to characterize that thinking. Clarifying our understanding of some of the most widely-held images surrounding leadership will assist in preparing the ground for our exploratory work in chapters 2 to 5, and help demonstrate why a fundamentally distinct approach to thinking about leadership is needed.

The focus of Chapter 2 is on leadership as grounded in learning. With the aid of the story of Bernardo's experience, we delve into the processes of assessing current realities in relation to a contentious problem, clarifying a preferred future, and harnessing energy for deep-reaching change. We examine the kinds of interventions that individuals can make to contribute to the group's joint leadership work.

Chapter 3 utilizes another in-depth story, this time involving Alice, to explore three core concepts that underpin learning-centered leadership, including the specific leadership-mode interventions made by individuals. The concepts are relational working, mindful working, and practice-basis.

The notion that leadership and management are distinct forms of action is the subject of Chapter 4. We move beyond unhelpful notions of leaders being in some ways different from managers to instead look at how the *processes* of leadership and management differ, and explore why the differences matter. We introduce the concept of the management mode, and see that while both the leadership mode and the management mode are necessary, in most organizational settings it is the latter that is dominant. While the management-mode dominance raises some problematic implications, recasting the leadership-management relationship opens up scope for complementary action.

“Active choice and leadership mode,” Chapter 5, deals with the inevitability that leadership in the form presented here brings with it risks and difficulties, as well as opportunities. Weighing up the potential benefits and consequences and deciding whether and how to intervene require the application of conscious, active choice. Through case examples we examine the exercise of choice in light of underlying cultural forces and challenging behaviors. A set of guidelines to support leadership-mode action is offered.

PART TWO The ARIES Framework—Practices and Tools

Five practices for making the leadership mode operational are introduced in Part 2 under the banner of ARIES: Attending, Reflecting, Inquiring, Expressing, and Synthesizing, with one chapter on each. We can extend our house construction analogy to Part 2. These chapters might be thought of as akin to the walls, flooring, and roof of our structure; they provide essential frameworks and support to help nurture the practice of this new form of leadership. The practices described represent counterpoints to the management-mode-oriented behavior patterns that dominate in most organizations. The chapters also include tools to assist practitioners in giving effect to this distinct leadership form.

Chapter 6 explores the important practice of attending, which goes beyond mere listening to denote paying attention to the richness of the present moment. Through examining a story of a local government change effort, we look at the need to differentiate between observation and inference, and the practicalities of doing so.

Reflecting, in Chapter 7, refers to practices that help us interpret, both individually and jointly, what is perceived. We introduce a tool, the Reflection Matrix, for making sense of multiple perspectives and discuss the process of reflecting in the moment.

Chapter 8, Inquiring, looks into the use of questioning processes to enable us to become more informed about the viewpoints of others, including their underlying thoughts, feelings, and assumptions. Far from being a purely technical

process, inquiring involves dealing with issues of defensiveness and threat, implying a need to be aware of one's impact on others from moment to moment. The chapter includes a framework of question types. Examples illustrate how to use these different types of questions to bring forth what deeply matters to others in relation to a particular subject.

Expressing one's views so as to foster learning by all involved is the subject of Chapter 9. It is a challenge to speak out about what is deeply important to us while also recognizing that our views are not "the truth," but only a part of a larger picture. This chapter introduces a framework that many of my workshop participants have found helpful in enabling them to speak out on matters they had previously found too difficult.

Chapter 10 discusses the practice of synthesizing as a key practice for advancing group learning. Interventions are described that can help connect and perhaps reinterpret or integrate diverse perspectives. A second aspect of synthesizing involves identifying core challenges that need to be reckoned with in the process of moving towards a preferred future.

The Epilogue reviews the main themes of the book and canvasses some aspects relating to the development of learning-centered leadership capability—for individuals and also for organizations and larger groups.

Throughout the book, stories and examples have been incorporated to illustrate opportunities for action, and challenges faced in the leadership mode. These illustrations variously reflect challenges for senior executives, middle managers, and experienced operational personnel in a range of settings. These instances are adapted from my own consulting and teaching experience and from discussions with participants in the many workshops and seminars I have conducted over more than a decade.

The stories and examples have been selected and shaped to support and draw out particular ideas, themes, and possibilities. The intention is to "bring to life" ways of seeing and practicing learning-centered leadership that, for the most part, exist only as potentialities and opportunities. (This form is emerging and largely obscured from view, due to conventional assumptions.) The illustrations do not purport to represent matters of fact, portray actual people or events, or prove that the concepts, practices, and tools offered are effective in application. Reflecting and reinforcing their fictional nature, the stories are referred to in the text as "case stories." That said, hundreds of workshop participants have found that the concepts, practices, and tools offer powerful new means for thinking about and practicing leadership. In addition, while the book focuses mainly on workplace applications, many have reported finding these resources useful in applications outside the workplace, such as in sporting, family, or community activities.

This is obviously not a short book, and I recognize that many people skim books on leadership and management rather than read them from cover to cover. So what advice can I give to help you gain the most from the book?

If your interest is primarily in tools and their application, then it is likely that you will be most interested in Part 2. If this is the case, you might begin by reading the summary at the end of each chapter in Part 1. Then, dip into those chapters that most interest you before going on to read Part 2 more closely. Part 1 does set up the frameworks for the rest of the book, so I encourage you not to skip through it too quickly. Moreover, chapters 2, 3, and 5 include case stories that deal with efforts to apply learning-centered leadership.

If your interests lie more with conceptual approaches to the subject of leadership, you are likely to find the chapters of Part 1 to be of most relevance. However, the tools and frameworks in Part 2 represent applications of the concepts, so you may find those of interest as well.

Let the exploration commence!