

LEADING BETWEEN

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The institutional landscape of modern society is being ripped up. Organisations are finding that the only way to satisfy the changing demands and expectations of customers and citizens is to be embedded in networks, able to stitch together different products, services, resources and skills in flexible combinations and deliver them when and where they are most needed. Splendid isolation is out. Collaboration is in.

But this radical disruption also spells trouble for many of the assumptions we have about what leadership means, what it is for and where we might look for it. Networks challenge our conceptions of leadership, which too often are still rooted in an outmoded ‘great man’ theory that mistakes the formal authority of status, rank or station with the exercise of leadership. When you ask people about the leadership of an organisation, most reach for the organogram and point to the top. When it comes to leading across networks, there are no such easy answers. New network-based ways of organising social and economic activity will only thrive if we can evolve new models of leadership that embrace the distinctive ‘organising logic’ of networks. ‘Leading between’ will be the new leadership imperative of the coming decades.

In business we have seen the ‘cult of the CEO’, with senior executives paid vast salaries because corporate survival is seen to depend on attracting and retaining talent. But as the controversy over ‘rewards for failure’ indicates, many such remuneration packages are only tenuously linked to actual business performance, and in a number of notorious cases executives have been given multi-million pound severance packages even after leading their companies to the verge of ruin. In education, we have seen the rise of ‘superheads’, often with very mixed results. In British local government we have seen the introduction of US-style elected mayors, in the hope that concentrating power in a single office will create more visible and effective leadership. But so far these have failed to capture the imagination or energise citizens, and in the few municipalities that have opted for local mayors electoral turnouts have not markedly improved.

In the reform agenda of the European Union, particularly as embodied in the recent Constitutional Convention, we have seen a push towards a conventionally hierarchical model of political leadership, with greater decision-making power concentrated at the centre. As Mark Leonard has argued, this search for some neat institutional arrangement ignores the fact that the EU is more like a network than a traditional organisation.* It misses the chance to breathe new life into a debate hamstrung by the false choice between federal superstate and free trade area, and could undermine the very flexibility on which EU integration has depended.

In all these examples, the response to a crisis of authority is to reinforce the traditional model of leadership. We seek saviours, then berate them when they fail. Wherever we look, our instinctive response to the complexity of organisational life is to strengthen the very forms of institution, and institutional authority, that it has exhausted. The command-and-control form of authority on which most large organisations were built does not tally with the underlying social reality. We need to take a different starting point.

* *Network Europe*,
Mark Leonard (Foreign
Policy Centre, 1999)

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* *Leadership Without Easy
Answers*, Ronald Heifetz
(1998)

In *Leadership without easy answers*, Ronald Heifetz* argues that conventional models of leadership confuse it with authority. ‘Followers’ look to a leader to solve their problems for them, ignoring their own capacity (and responsibility) to solve it for themselves. People in authority believe that their vision of change

is legitimate simply because they are ‘leaders’. And when things go wrong, it is the ‘leaders’ who are blamed and replaced, with little or no reflection on the underlying causes of the problem. To put it another way, leadership is not something you are but something you do. For Heifetz, leadership is about mobilising people to do what he calls adaptive work; forcing them to confront the gap between the rhetoric of what they are trying to achieve and the reality of their current capacity to achieve it. Leaders do not try to impose change. They make the case for why change is necessary, and then make the space for it occur. Leaders create a holding environment for those they lead, managing the tension and stress which change inevitably generates but never allowing them to run away from it.

This simple insight is profound in relation to leadership within an organisation. But it is revolutionary in helping us to see the challenge of leadership across networks. Divorced from formal positions of authority, leadership – mobilising people to do adaptive work – is as feasible between organisations as it is within them, even if the resources that are deployed and constraints experienced may vary depending on the context.

Network leaders start from the outside-in, with the deepest needs of their users, and work back to establish the configuration of organisations, resources and capacities needed to meet them. The task then is to find ways of persuading other organisations of the need to work together. Network leaders understand that decisive action may be of little use in an unpredictable world. Douglas Rushkoff argues that the real power and attraction of the internet is not the knowledge or facts or ideas it supplies but the opportunity to interact with others: “Content is not king. Contact is king.”* The same goes for leadership. Network leaders know that they cannot provide some definitive vision statement; but they can structure the right kind of conversation, create a language that enables people to cross boundaries that they otherwise would not.

But deliberation does not mean inaction. Networked leadership is not leadership by committee, where the sole criterion for action is the lowest common denominator. Network leaders understand that different actors will not always agree on the appropriate course of action, not least because in a complex world the correct path will rarely be clear, and stumbling upon it may require processes of trial-and-error and learning by doing. By sharing perspectives and building understanding, however, it is possible to foster the trust and the set of common values on which all networks depend, and which are robust enough to withstand

* *Open Source
Democracy*,
Douglas Rushkoff
(Demos, 2004)

considerable variety in the actions undertaken by others. Geoff Mulgan describes the medal awarded to the general that disobeyed orders, but in so doing changed the course of battle. “True authority”, as Fritjof Capra puts it, “consists in empowering others to act.”

Network leadership would not be necessary if the institutional silos in which many of us find ourselves were not so attractive. Partnership is often treated as a structure rather than an activity, and formal mechanisms for decision-making are put in place before the different actors have had a chance to move out of their particular silos. Network leaders understand the attraction of these comfort zones, but look for ways to help people grow out of them.

Certainty of vision is wrapped up in many of our mental models of leadership. But in the modern world this can be a dangerous myth, leading us down seductive avenues that turn out to be blind alleys. Given the complexity of modern life, it seems the only firm basis for acting is to be a permanent learner. Network leaders do not see themselves as all-knowers but as lead learners. They understand that a large part of leadership is about shutting up and listening. Network leaders make a point of not having all the answers.

Network leaders understand that leadership is not about a simple transaction between leaders and led. Instead, they reach back to the ancient ideal of *self-government* as the ultimate goal of leadership. They understand that most systems – from organisations to cities to biological ecosystems – are too complex and unpredictable to be controlled from the top-down. Yet they display an underlying tendency towards self-organisation and order. This self-organisation can be shaped in purposeful ways, provided we can develop leadership models that *distribute* leadership across organisations rather than imposing it from the top. To align leadership with the built-in instinctive adaptive responses of organisations, network leaders understand the need to nurture other leaders wherever they may be found. As Sun Tzu put it long ago, “the good leader is the one the people adore; the wicked leader is the one the people despise; the great leader is the one the people say ‘we did it ourselves’”.

Perhaps the most important commodity for this new conception of leadership to take hold is trust. Leaders in hierarchies rely on chains of command and clear lines of accountability to ensure that the ‘right’ decisions are made, and the ‘right’ people censured if they fail. Network leaders (and those they lead) cannot

be blamed if things go wrong unexpectedly; but if they undermine the trust on which networks depend, they must take full responsibility. As Karen Stephenson puts it, “if you traffic in trust, you traffic in betrayal.”

In an uncertain world, it is convenient to think that leaders will be saviours – and that we have someone to blame when things do not go our way. But the logic of the network society is that those easy answers no longer exist. Acknowledging the depth of our interdependence with others may be frightening; but if it wakes us up to the potential within all of us to solve our problems, so much the better. 