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Pointing the Finger at Leadership

Richard A. Barker
Upper Iowa University

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	Editor's Preface	1
PAPERS	Pointing the Finger at Leadership Richard A. Barker	3
	Measuring the Effectiveness of a Workplace Diversity Training Program: A Field Study Kenneth P. De Meuse, Todd J. Hostager, and Kathryn S. O'Neill	10
	Where Have All the Leaders Gone? A Holistic Leadership Model for These Uncertain Times Jann E. Freed	17
	Promoting Ethical Corporate Behavior in a Global Context Jonathan R. B. Halbesleben, M. Ronald Buckley, Michael G. Harvey, and Milorad M. Novicevic	31
	Perceptions Regarding the Impact of Workplace Attire on Workplace Outcomes Katherine Karl and Joy V. Peluchette	40
END NOTES	Guidelines for Contributors	47



Pointing the Finger at Leadership

Richard A. Barker, Ed.D
Upper Iowa University

Abstract: The word leadership is often used incorrectly to refer to management, supervision, command, and statesmanship. Scholars rarely, if ever, make any distinction among these four different constructs. Most theories of leadership are really theories of supervision, and the words leadership and supervision are used interchangeably. This paper attempts to distinguish between the two.

Here she comes again! Every time I see that woman, she is handing me more work to do. What is it this time? Oh, goody! She wants me to create an instructors' guide for an online course in crisis management, something that does not fall neatly into my academic repertoire. She hands me a four inch binder stuffed with course documents developed for FEMA in 1999, and says I can do it any way I want to as long as it conforms to the institution's online format and incorporates government guidelines. To make a short story shorter, I agreed to do it. Many people call this good leadership; they might be right, but not for the reasons they may think.

Leadership is not about taking action to get people to work hard to accomplish organizational goals--that is called *supervision*; more specifically, it is the management function of *directing*. It does not matter if the supervisor in question is the highest ranking person in the organization or the lowest.

But, many people say, leadership is all about coordinating the work of others. No, coordinating the work of others is the broad object that distinguishes organizational management from what individuals do to manage themselves--that is, allocating resources toward the accomplishment of a goal. Commonly, the word *leadership* is incorrectly applied to good management, both personal management--which would be better called *efficacy*--and organizational management.

But, they assert, she persuaded/inspired/influenced you to accept an assignment you are otherwise under no obligation to accept. Not exactly. Her words and actions represented a small fraction of the many factors that influenced my cooperation, and it is the tendency to oversimplify this process of influence that leads to the misapplication of the word *leadership*.

The sources of my motivation to accept the assignment predated my encounter with this "leader" by more than fifty years, when my disposition toward doing the right thing was developed. Since then, that disposition has been built, battered, and otherwise shaped by the countless events and people which have provided varying degrees of support and discouragement. The specific reasons for my acceptance of this particular assignment began to form at least five years before the encounter, when my devotion to the institution was inspired by a character who had been dead for nearly one hundred years, and who did not say or write anything that was intended to be inspirational (for the full story of that incident, see Barker 2003).

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Many authors answer the question *what is leadership?* by suggesting that there are so many different opinions and so many potential answers that there is no point in trying to pin one

down. They say that because they either do not recognize or will not acknowledge that there are only two possible answers, and that the one they have chosen does not work. The answer they have generally chosen is that leadership is a product of the individual--all about traits, characteristics, styles, and abilities of the leader, and how these traits, characteristics, styles, and abilities interact with the situation to produce desired outcomes.

Whether we begin an historical discussion of leadership with Herodotus, who wrote biographies of kings and conquerors to illustrate moral consequences of *hubris* (outrageous arrogance or an abuse of power) and *ate* (moral insensitivity), or with Plutarch, who perfected the biographical form of recording history and was somewhat less interested than Herodotus in relating moral lessons than in what the lives of certain individuals had to teach us in positive terms, or with Machiavelli, who told the stories of princes to illustrate how they succeeded and how they failed, we are focused entirely on individuals and their performance. Machiavelli (1981) set us firmly upon the path of a feudal obsession with the persona of the leader (read monarch) and with its relationship to winning, and this is what most people mean by *leadership*. Modern industrial leadership theory, whether it is called transformational, LMX, servant leadership, path-goal, charismatic, etc., etc., is still attempting to define Plato's philosopher-king, and how that king's actions result in performance.

The answer to the question of leadership that stresses the individual is doomed to failure because, no matter how much we wish it were otherwise, nothing in social groups is accomplished by individuals working alone. It is the equivalent of suggesting that the erosion of a beach is caused by one particular wave. There is little, if any, evidence that any given individual has any reliable control over outcomes that involve other people. Those who do not perceive a gross oversimplification in this approach are either foolish, fraudulent, or trapped in an ideology.

The other possible answer to the question *what is leadership?* is that leadership is a product of a collectivity--all about what everyone is and what everyone does. The leader is a component of leadership--as the one wave is a component in the beach's erosion process--but not necessarily the chief component, and not deserving of focused attention. Even if the one wave is really big and powerful, it is still a small part of the overall process. The leader is **not** the determinant of leadership. This answer is not popular because it cannot be used to flatter or to glorify CEOs and politicians, and it provides little to sell to those who would be kings and queens.

Leadership is a *process of transformative change where the ethics of individuals are integrated into the mores of a community as a means of evolutionary social development* (Barker 2002, p. 106). Leadership does not result from the actions of an individual, but from the collective action of a community of individuals who have arrived at a more or less common understanding of the good, and at a consensus for how the good is accomplished. Leadership always occurs in the context of a crisis, though what constitutes a crisis is always defined by the community involved in the process.

Leadership is not something that emanates from the leader. It is something that emanates from "the sum of human wills" (Tolstoy 1952, p. 470). Tolstoy felt that to understand leadership, we must turn our attention away from the leader, and toward "the common and infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved."

COMMON AND INFINITESIMALLY SMALL ELEMENTS

Why did I act in conjunction with organizational objectives? In a word, *eudaimonia*. I acted out of an anticipation of a sense of personal fulfillment in doing something that I consider to be of consequence. I did not expect this action to result in "happiness" or necessarily anything resembling pleasure. In fact, I expected very little sensation of pleasure in taking on this grueling project. Rather, it was an opportunity to serve the needs of a community to which I have

committed my efforts and my good will. I anticipated the sort of contentment that proceeds from meeting someone else's needs.

What is the source of this commitment? It cannot be tied to any individual, or to any single episode of inspiration. It is something that was well-developed long before I ever heard of the institution, and applied to the institution when I arrived. It is an array of ideas, sensations, images, memories, and other internal, unmeasurable things that indicate to me that my efforts in relation to the institution are worthwhile.

This commitment is an outcome of all the moral lessons I have assimilated since I was old enough to be punished for misbehaving. It is the result of countless people I have seen, and a comparison of the sort of life these people live with the sort of life I think I should live. It is the result of an assimilation of the meaning of life and of the goals of life implied by the moral order in which I have lived. As Lawler (2005) observed about important personal qualities that are valued in effective relationships across varied situations, "we know relatively little about *how* these facets come together to constitute authenticity, effective leadership, or effective caring" (p. 225).

THE CLAIM OF LEADERSHIP

The most perplexing bugaboo to leadership scholars seems to be the essential ontological question: When is it *leadership*, and when is it something else? The prevalence of logical positivism in modern scholastic endeavor, and the desperation of certain disciplines, such as psychology, to appear *scientific* by adopting logical positivism exclusively, has left the typical American academic woefully unprepared to consider ontological questions or to engage in ontological analysis. As a result, the term *leadership* is applied liberally to a wide variety of phenomena that would be better identified by the words *management*, *supervision*, *statesmanship*, or *command*.

If one has answered the question of leadership by accepting the notion that *leadership* is a product of the leader, then the answer to the ontological question is that it is *leadership* when the leader is doing it. Is **everything** the leader does *leadership*? There is no satisfactory answer to this question. If leadership is everything the leader does, what happens when the leadership role changes hands, as it nearly always does? When the leader takes a bath, is this *leadership*? If leadership is only some of the things a leader does, then which things? How does one make the distinction between the things that a leader does that constitute *leadership*, and the things that a leader does that do not constitute *leadership*? There is no possibility for a widely accepted answer, and that leads scholars to throw up their hands and claim that defining leadership is impossible or that many definitions are equally suitable. That is, of course, a consequence of their fallacious view of leadership.

If one has answered the question of leadership by accepting the notion that *leadership* is a collectivity, then the answer to the ontological question can avoid sorting behavior into an Hegelian dialectic. If leadership is a social process, then we can adopt Burns' (1978) conclusion that leadership is something we experience, such as a transformation of our moral consciousness, or an inspiration to be a part of something larger than ourselves. One *feels* leadership in the same sense that one feels contentment, feels desperation, or feels affiliation, and that is a property of all individuals involved in the process. The fallacy of the leader-centered view lies in the attribution of that feeling to the leader's style, characteristics, or actions.

Rost (1991) set out to define the circumstances that identify leadership when it is taking place. Rost's definition can be summarized in the following way: Leadership is a dynamic social and political relationship that is based in a mutual development of purposes which may never be realized. Rost pictured a group of people, working toward a collective end, with a leadership role that passes from person to person as dynamics of influence change over time.

The word *mutual*, which Rost adopted from Burns (1978), has a significance that makes this approach to defining leadership much different from the approach that centers on the leader and on the leader's role in getting people to work toward specific goals. Simply, no one needs supervision or inspiration to work toward a goal the priority of which is already internalized, and as I attempted to illustrate above, the process of internalizing a goal is not as facile as being exposed to the leader's song and dance.

When people have committed themselves to accomplishing a *mutual* goal, do the efforts of these people need to be *managed* to be effective? Certainly, resources must be allocated, timelines and other plans need to be coordinated, etc. But the view that people must be coaxed by the leader to work toward their own ends is simply wrong. If they are not working toward specific ends, if they do need to be coerced or beguiled, then the goals are not *mutual* and whatever they are involved in is *not* leadership.

It is the mutual development of purposes which indicates that *leadership* is taking place, and successful results are not required to establish an ontological standing. Experience is the basis for ontological assessment. We have all experienced a social process we are willing to call *leadership*, where we have worked toward an end of our choosing as part of a collectivity. Perhaps we did this in spite of the leader--probably not because of the leader, unless the leader symbolized or facilitated the end we hoped to accomplish.

CRISIS AND LEADERSHIP

As stated above, leadership is normally experienced in a time of crisis. Depending on the social group doing the judging, the word *crisis* can be applied to a variety of circumstances that can range from a shooting war to a perception that children are not learning what they should be learning in school. Common crises include severe political conflict, natural disaster, economic disaster, gross injustice, threats to the community, and so forth. The degree of conflict or difficulty needed to stimulate action is also a matter of collective agreement.

Allison (1971) illustrated quite clearly the perils of attributing collective action to rational thought, to informed decision making, and to deliberate actions. By comparing different models of analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Allison all but eliminated the rational model as a viable explanation of what happened. Still, the most common theory in use applied to leadership is the theory that attributes collective outcomes to a rational actor. Two more realistic possibilities emerged from Allison's work that can be meaningfully applied to an effective analysis of a crisis--Model II and Model III.

Model II, the organizational model, suggests that collective outcomes are the result of an application of standard operating procedures. The organization has a repertoire of behavior that it applies to all problems equally--the engineering department treats all problems like engineering problems, the security department treat all problems as security problems, the production department treats all problems like production problems, the marketing department treats all problems as marketing problems, etc. When there is a crisis, the new problem is met with standard conceptual frames and methods of problem solving whether they are appropriate or not. This is **not** leadership, and most people would not think of it as leadership. Yet, it does explain many organizational and social outcomes, it indicates why leadership and management are different things, and it also explains why *leadership* generally does not happen in organizations.

Model III, the political model, suggests that collective outcomes are the result of messy processes of bargaining, compromising, influencing, posturing, maneuvering, etc. When there is a crisis, there is no change in the process except perhaps a focus of attention and a reassessment of goals, priorities, and agendas. When a crisis stimulates a process of *leadership*, there is an alignment of goals, priorities, and agendas toward a common purpose; sometimes this alignment is strong, sustained, and highly defined, and sometimes it is less strong and dissipative. Model III is the only one of the three that can be used meaningfully to understand leadership.

The sort of crisis that stimulates a process of leadership has two important elements: There is a general consensus that a crisis exists to the extent that something needs to be done, and there is a general consensus regarding what it will take in terms of collective action to resolve the crisis. Usually, someone emerges from the group to be held up as a symbol of *what we all want*. This person is often an unlikely leader, sometimes a reluctant leader. This person either says something, or does something, or represents something that everyone else involved in the process understands about the crisis and how it should be resolved. It is rare that this leader has any real control over activities and events. The leader can stimulate directional thinking among those involved in the leadership process, but so can a commercial, a zoo animal, a cultural image, a sporting event, or any other person, group, or phenomenon.

CASE EXAMPLES

The crisis management course that I develop will use various disasters as cases from which lessons of logistics, preparedness, response communication networks, organizing resources, etc. may be learned. They will not be lessons in *leadership*, but lessons in *management*, *supervision*, and *command*. A comparison of three cases can illustrate the difference for purposes of this essay: the attack on the World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina, and the Iraq War.

The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 created an instantaneous and more or less general, widespread consensus in the USA regarding the nature of the crisis, and how this crisis--that is, the rescue, recovery, and restoration operations, and not necessarily the political aftermath--should be addressed. Evidence for its claim as a leadership process includes not only this consensus, but the creation of a symbolic leader.

Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of New York at the time, could not mount enough support for a Senate campaign in New York before the attack. After the attack, Giuliani came to symbolize what was needed by the city and its people to cope with this unexpected crisis. Biographers will list his calmness, his personal resolve, certain of his utterances, his organization of the city's resources, and other things as indicating his great leadership traits and skills. But, as always, this list does not tell the actual story. Before September 11th, Giuliani was the lamest of lame ducks. He was no different in character, skill, or ability on September 11th, 12th, and 13th than he was on September 8th, 9th, and 10th. Why was he not a great leader then?

Giuliani is a good example of how leaders emerge from the leadership process, and not the other way around. He was widely respected by many citizens of New York--I know because I lived there when he was mayor--for facilitating various improvements, including reduction of the crime rate and a general cleanup of the city. But he was not respected widely enough to be nominated as Republican candidate for the Senate. After the attack, Giuliani acted the way he always acted, did the things one who knew him would expect him to do, and just clicked with virtually all Americans, both inside and outside the city. He was the right symbol for the crisis.

Contrast that with Hurricane Katrina which was no less a disaster, but did not produce a widespread leadership process insofar as I can tell at the time of this writing. There was no widespread consensus that there was a crisis sufficient enough for concerted action, and there has been no symbolic leader to have emerged from the process. This scenario should not be unexpected because it is a typical national response to hurricanes that hit the US every year. Hurricanes normally represent the sort of crisis for which there are institutional means of response, and no need for leadership. No real impression of crisis beyond an expected, and perhaps acceptable, level of tragedy was registered in the national consciousness until more than a week after the event when it came apparent that institutional support was not meeting expectations. The crisis was not Hurricane Katrina, the crisis was a failure of expected institutional support.

Eventually, news reports and government mismanagement encouraged people to raise funds and to offer assistance beyond what they did for hurricane victims in Florida the year before, but it was not generally something to which one would attach the word *leadership* without looking at isolated, local efforts. There appear, at the time of this writing, to be effective commanders in charge of operations, but that does not make it a *leadership* process. There will be some considerable political fallout, and preparedness reassessment, but these, too, do not constitute *leadership*.

The criticism of President Bush and other government officials, particularly Michael Brown, the head of FEMA at the time of the disaster, indicates why most people still cling to the old feudal paradigm of leadership--having someone to blame. If leadership is a collective process, then we have no one to blame if something goes wrong besides ourselves. Many people do not like to accept blame. On the other hand, maintaining the myth that leadership is a function of the leader gives us considerable leeway to blame those in charge for poor performance even though they may not have sufficient control to solve the problem (Gemmill & Oakley 1992).

The war in Iraq provides an interesting study of a leadership process. Setting aside those who support President Bush, right or wrong (indications are that this group represents about 30% of the population), there was no widespread consensus of a crisis concerning Iraq before the war. There was widespread concern over what to do in the aftermath of the attack on September 11th, but that leadership process was dissipating by the time the Iraq war began. Many people had concluded that the attack on Afghanistan was a good step in solving the problem.

By August 2005, there appeared to be a growing consensus among many Americans, again excluding radical Bush supporters, that the war was becoming a crisis. Rather than the instantaneous response generated by 9/11, this new response--as a widespread consensus--was rather slow to develop. There were, of course, people who opposed the war and considered it a moral crisis from the beginning, but a more general consensus became apparent at the emergence of a leader--Cindy Sheehan.

Sheehan emerged from obscurity as a symbol of the anti-war movement not because she held office, or knew the business, or communicated a vision, or was particularly charismatic, or had a winning strategy, or had any trait, or took any action often recommended for business or political leaders. Sheehan was a grieving mother who had one simple, personal goal--to meet with President Bush and to ask him to explain why her son died.

As many leaders do, Sheehan symbolically clarified *what we all want* for two different groups with opposing ideas about what the crisis is and how it should be solved. For the anti-war group, she symbolized what was wrong with the war, what was wrong with those who took us to war, and how the crisis should be solved--by ending it. For the pro-war group, she symbolized the danger of not supporting the war and why the war should continue. Other than President Bush, the pro-war group's symbolic leader in a negative form was Cindy Sheehan. Sheehan stimulated two opposing leadership processes, not on purpose, but, as often happens, by accident. She emerged as a symbol rather than choosing to be a symbol.

CONCLUSION

"What we call leadership may actually be unique to a particular set of circumstances and events rather than something that may be generalized unproblematically to the world at large" (Prince 2005, p. 110). Western thinkers tend to take an object-oriented approach to understanding the world, and a command and control approach to understanding leadership in the face of overwhelming evidence that not all things can be known. Prince drew this conclusion after examining Eastern lines of thinking that focus on integration and coordination within an inclusive frame of reference.

It is clear that the generally accepted view of leadership is strongly influenced by the feudal system of government (Barker, 2005 2002), where the monarch is in charge. It is

unreasonable to assume that the feudal paradigm will be abandoned by organizations anytime soon, or that feudal principles of government will cease to define management. It is, however, reasonable to recognize that the "thing" we like to call *leadership* is something entirely different from management, and not management in some advanced form. There are other ways of thinking about leadership that are much more fruitful in facilitating an understanding.

Hurricane Katrina displaced the two opposing leadership processes stimulated by Sheehan. No doubt both these processes are still underway, but they will both dissipate and restructure themselves into some new form until there is no longer a perception of crisis. During this restructuring, new leaders will emerge from the process to symbolize and clarify *what we all want* as those wants and needs progressively change over time from interactive exchange with the environment (Barker 2002).

Foster (1986) considered leadership to be a *temporal property of the actor*. Using the examples above, along with commonly cited examples of Gandhi, who had no authority or official position, and Winston Churchill, who was obscure before World War II and thrown from office immediately after the war, we can see how time and circumstances combine to elevate a particular individual to the level of symbol. The leadership process creates the leader; it is not the leader who creates the leadership process. In reality, the leadership role will shift from person to person, and may be performed by many persons at once, as ideas and perceptions formulate, dissipate, and reform. That is *leadership*.

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