THE DARK SIDE AND LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This paper revisits the concept of the dark side of leadership, in light of the considerably changed context for leadership. Earlier conceptualisations of the dark side focused on the leader. However, the leader-follower relationship is an intertwined, reciprocal one and hence this original conceptualisation of the dark side is somewhat incomplete. Moreover, job intensification and expansion make it humanely impossible for one individual to provide the necessary leadership and so distributed forms of leadership, such as teams and committees, and the creation of an enterprise culture have emerged. These consequent changes breed their own unique possibilities for exploitation and exposure from the dark side of leadership as is evident in the recent spate of scandals in both business and the military.

Keywords: Leadership, leader-follower relationships, dark side

Word Length: 4500

Introduction

The challenges associated with a rapidly changing and complex business environment have changed the senior executive role (Senge 1995; Sarros and Butchatsky 1996; Scholtes 1998). One consequence, has been the emergence of distributed forms of leadership such as teams and committees, and the creation of an enterprise culture (Gronn 2003). As leadership is a key driver of performance and noting the heightened focus on leadership in most large organisations, there is a need for caution over the tendency to depict leaders as a paragon of virtue, or to assign an exalted range of attributes to what constitutes leadership (Kets de Vries 1997). As proof of this misplaced faith in an over focus on inspired leadership, the corporate world has witnessed a series of high profile scandals (Enron, Tyco, Parmalat, HIH, and OneTel to name a few) that might well have been scripted from the Mad Hatter’s tea party (from Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll).

The recent prisoner-abuse scandal in Iraq reflects a parallel negative experience for the U.S. military. There is arguably a troubling realisation of a pattern of abuse (Nordland and Barry 2004). Not unreasonably, the accompanying loss of public confidence in both the military and in
the corporate world would suggest a need for some urgent stocktaking. Adapting Kets de Vries words, this paper sets out to firstly, to remind ourselves of the dysfunctional or self destructive behaviours of leaders (Kets de Vries 1997) that can eclipse the bright side to the detriment of both individual and organisation. Secondly, this paper reconceptualises the dark side to go beyond the individual to include distributed forms of leadership that have emerged as the leader’s role as changed and widened. An finally, this paper argues a need to reflect on the dynamic interplay of social context that in turn bring their own unique possibilities for exploitation and exposure from the dark side of leadership.

Dark Side of Leadership in Review

When Jay Conger asked "how do leaders produce such negative outcomes - and why" (Conger 1990: 44), his interest was focused on three perceived skills deficiencies of the leader: These were: first, in the leader’s vision, second, in their communication and impression-management skills, and third, in their general management skills (Conger 1990). Thus, Conger’s interest and focus, taken to its logical extreme, appears in locating a skills deficiency in cases of leadership failure and thus enabling a more logical, even 'perfectly' rational leader.

In contrast to this rational model view, and based on clinical observations of senior executives, Kets de Vries critiques what drives people to become leaders (Kets de Vries 1997). Narcissism, an essential stage in infantile development through which we all pass and which contributes to self-esteem and identity, is intricately connected with leadership. A sense of imbalance in this area can leave some people fixated by power, status, prestige, and superiority. The underlying premise is that behaviour is determined in the unconscious and that underlying quirks and irrational processes in a leader’s personality will prevent the organisation from performing well. As De Vries says, leadership invites a good deal of psychological stress brought on by pressures such as loneliness of command, fear of a loss of power, and fear of success. He also describes the
sense of depression – ‘what now’ – on having achieved a lifetime’s ambition. These stresses can induce a manifestation of the dark side - dysfunctional or self-destructive behaviour that “can snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory” (Kets de Vries 1997: 11).

An examination of the views by Conger and de Vries suggests a somewhat mechanistic rational leader perspective, related to a symptom of some weakness in skills or the consequence of an unbalanced or “reactive narcissist” personality based leader attribute (Kets de Vries 1997). The key point is that while negative personality traits are present to some degree in all people, access to position and heightened pressure on leaders can encourage extreme manifestations of their emotional stability. The focus however remains leader-centric.

Joseph Campbell’s observations on myth - ‘the hero’s journey’ - and his commentary on the “Force” and the “Dark Side” (Campbell and Moyers 1988), provides a mythological insight that partially explains this individual or leader-centric focus. In fairness de Vries does also identify the leader-follower relationship as a source of problems. However, what is highlighted is the tendency for the transference (of hopes and fantasies) by followers onto the present leader. Thus, the dark side concept remains rooted in a leader-centered focus, with the risk in a strongly narcissistic leader’s inclination to see and hear only what they want to see and hear – what is in effect a partial explanation only of the tendency for groupthink (Robbins 2001). However, what the concept of groupthink also suggests is a wider contextual and relational understanding of the leadership process, and so also of the consequent negative implications of what is termed the dark side. One example, the implicit potential in ‘reactive narcissistic’ leaders is to create a climate of dependency that kills independent thinking. The contention that ‘misbehaviour’ in organisations will be ever present (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999) is really just another example of the influence of context, while the perceptual nature of this issue is evident in the very definition of misbehaviour as an imposed one, decided by the group that has power.
In sum, rather than static injunctions based on clinical observations of personal behaviour, or prescriptions founded on apparent individual skills flaws, there is benefit in pausing and reflecting on the apparent crisis in leadership. It is worth recalling also that ‘crisis’ in Chinese "means both danger and opportunity" (Lynch and Huang 1998: xvi). One opportunity in rethinking the dark side is in terms of factoring the changed context for leadership, which in turn invites a questioning of basic assumptions about what it means to be a leader or a follower in an age of “unbridled materialism” in corporate life (Leung and Cooper 2003: 505) and in a complex, pluralistic society (Castells 2000). From an educational and leader development perspective, it is also timely and a pertinent opportunity to heed the warning by Argyris (1992) that programs which fail to distinguish between espoused and practiced theories run the risk of promoting the status-quo or at best only changing at the espoused level.

**Leadership and Leadership Process**

Leadership as a process is a "complex multi-faceted phenomenon" that seems unsuited to a single definition (Yukl 1998: 5). However, in broad terms it might be explained as an inter-personal process of influence associated with affecting the motivation of followers towards some goal (Yukl 1998; Mumford, Zaccaro et al. 2000). This subject has been studied extensively over the years, ranging from an initial focus on traits, to behaviour-based approaches, to power-influence and to situational approaches. More recently a comprehensive framework has been discussed under the label of transformational leadership (Bass 1981; Avolio, Waldman et al. 1991; Tichy 1999), and completing the definitional theme is the suggestion of a ‘unified theory’ that expresses leadership as a function of the development of consciousness (Harung, Heaton et al. 1995).

Despite the range of approaches to studying leadership, it is commonly agreed that leadership is a socially constructed reality (Rost and Baker 2000) that changes in accordance with the work environment. Thus, while simple manual work may require controlling approaches, sophisticated
knowledge work places a greater demand on those involved for self-management and effectiveness (Harung, Heaton et al. 1995). From a functional perspective, reflecting the post-industrial world of uncertainty and rapid social and technological change, leadership has evolved beyond a simplistic, cause–effect dyadic view of the leadership relationship. A post-industrial definition of leadership gives greater attention to complex social relationships among people who practice leadership (Rost and Baker 2000). The leader-follower relationship is influencing, but not coercive; it is collaborative and not directed; and is based on mutual needs and purposes and not exclusively on organisational goals. Perhaps most important, is the suggestion by Rost et al. that there are no followers in this post-industrial definition of leadership. Rather, everyone is involved as collaborators.

Thus, in reconsidering some basic assumptions, a good start is in understanding the shift from a simplistic, cause-effect, dyadic view of the leadership relationship. A related consideration is the need to shift from leadership as a leader-centric command and control process, designed to gain competitive advantage in a rational goal-oriented sense. In the new, post-industrial environment the leadership relationship is an influence process that incorporates the complexities of social processes in a pluralistic society (Castells 2000; Rost and Baker 2000). This dynamic relationship illustrated in Figure 1, operates in a wider, complex social context. Position based authority is not sensitive enough to context and as organisations come to terms with the changed environment, the need for a new approach in leadership is apparent.

Figure 1: A Dynamic Activity Systems View
The Individual Price of Leadership: A Sporting Analogy

It would seem that traditional sports and exercise programs have a lot in common with business leadership and leadership development programs. The common emphasis is on results (the balance sheet, score, clock), and on viewing the marketplace or sporting environment as battlefields against the competition (opponent), with the workers or individual as an apparent machine. Yet, as another commentator remarks, the competitive pursuit of career advancement and success has its price (Gronn 2003: 136). This assessment might apply to leaders and players in the harsh realities of sports, as much as it does in the corporate game.

One might ask but at what cost? For example, it is not always easy to get the attention you deserve, nor the privacy or anonymity you might crave, if you're in the public eye. Gronn identifies some other costs, including: the need for mastery at all costs and consequent workaholic pattern of job performance, peer envy and withdrawal from the competition for status. Other notable considerations include: of having to come to terms with the loneliness of command—the unnerving experience with being the only person at the very top and needing to acquire the ability to be alone without succumbing to a sense of abandonment and loneliness; the sense of failure or inadequacy that may be internalised and which does not need to be reinforced socially (Gronn, p135); the experience of public humiliation or embarrassment when for example, a contract is not renewed that carries a stigma that entails a painful redefinition of status; and public failure that can also be accompanied by feelings of shame, disappointment and depression.

Ironically, the price of success may also be failure. In sports, constant scrutiny and surprisingly frequent criticism may not deter a player from consistently producing the goods. However, while sport can be very unforgiving at least players get the chance to redeem a poor game with a more emphatic performance on the following weekend. The same almost certainly could not be said about the prospects of leaders in the public and military.
Extending the Conceptualisation of the Dark Side

As outlined, there has been a fundamental change in the leadership role and a consequent need to shift from viewing leadership as a command and control process. ThisEarlier perspective was designed to gain competitive advantage in a rational goal-oriented sense. A post-industrial view of the leadership relationship emphasises an influence process incorporating the complexities of social processes in a pluralistic society. Given the level of significant change in the business context, and the destructive potential of leadership for organisations, there is (not surprisingly) an increased focus in attention from the public, the media and legislators on the attendant risks of leadership failure. Consequently, it is necessary to extend Conger’s and Kets de Vries work into the social and structural dimension where the following interrelated considerations, add insight to the capacity for leadership at all levels of an organisation to operate to the detriment of both individual and organisation. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq brings these issues into sharp relief. An editorial in the US Military Times concludes: “This was not just a failure of leadership at the local command level. This was a failure that ran straight to the top. Accountability here is essential – even if that means relieving top leaders from duty in a time of war” (U.S. Military Times, 17 May 2004).

Followership is important in the discussion of leadership for several reasons. For one thing, both leader and follower roles are fundamental roles that individuals shift in and out of depending upon the context that they find themselves in (Daft 2002). To explain, everyone – leaders included – are also followers at one time or another. Arguably also, all leaders, regardless of their position of authority, have some kind of boss or group of people that they are answerable to. A second consideration is implicit in the definition of leadership as an influence relationship. This means that an individual leader is likely to be influenced by the actions and the attitudes of followers. In fact, the contingency theories are based on how leaders adjust their behaviour to fit situations, especially their followers. Thus it is a reciprocal relationship, and as much as
followers’ influence can enhance or underscore a leader’s shortcomings, they might also enhance or underscore the dark side of the leader. This reciprocal partnership warrants greater attention, particularly as power and decision making gets pushed further downwards with the trend towards worker empowerment and delegated decision making (Daft 2002).

Seymour Hersh, in his book *The Dark Side of Camelot* that traces the life and policies of John F. Kennedy, noted that after his death Kennedy’s glamour and wit combined with his successes in foreign affairs and domestic policies, both real and imagined, created the myth of Camelot (Hersh 1997). Yet, there was a dark side to Camelot and to John Kennedy, with Hersh pointing to the glamour President’s private life and personal obsessions that affected the affairs of the nation and its foreign policies far more than most realise. Hersh points to the power of beauty and tells of how otherwise strong and self-reliant men and women were awed and seduced by Kennedy’s magnetism and competed with one another to please the most charismatic leader of the time. However, the reciprocal element to the relationship is highlighted in the following comment: “mythologising the man did not help him and did not help us, because it allowed us to not take responsibility for our participation in the public life” (Hersh 1997: 34). Pointing to the dangers of illusion, this quote by a former lover reflects the inherent effect of ‘allowing this wonderful leader to do it’ (effectively anything he wanted), that it did not invite them (followers) to think.

The collapse of the Enron Corporation is a more recent corporate example of dysfunctional behaviour and the reciprocal effect on both leaders and followers. While Kennedy’s style was charismatic, executives described Jeffrey Skilling, former Enron CEO as a towering, intimidating figure at the top of the company who let no detail of his empire escape his attention – as an intense hands-on manager. Similarly, the Chief Financial Officer Mr. Fastow was described as a bullying taskmaster who tried to fire lawyers who did not approve deals that he was transacting with partnerships (FT.COM 2002). The collapse of Enron has endorsed a view that America’s chief executives need to be reigned in, in order to improve corporate responsibility and protect
shareholders. Arguably, there are questions about how much chief executive and directors can or should know about complex details, but equally auditors need also to not be compliant when pushed by management.

An example of a structural consideration relates to risk and responsibility. There is an important question to be asked in terms of the adequacy of a leader centered focus in terms of risk and responsibility, noting the greatly expanded job responsibility (Gronn 2003) and complexity of work that requires senior executives to rely more on others (DePree 1999). The consequent shift in emphasis towards a shared leadership responsibility, and the distributed nature of leadership arguably present leaders with a paradox: a limited capacity to intervene requires a greater reliance on others, yet the leader must at all times retain accountability. This can be a problematic choice when circumstances turn out unfavourably such as in the case of Union Carbide and the gas explosion in India. Under these circumstances, rather than focus on the malign side of individual leaders, it may be more instructive to consider the effects of structural and cultural context.

The need is for independent and critical thinking followers, yet one wonders at the structural factors that might inhibit such an outcome. There are two other contextual factors also at play. As leaders gain increased responsibility in organisations they are less and less specialised. Thus, they operate in a zone of heightened uncertainty, needing to rely on others, compounded by also not having as much time as they used to. Cumulatively, the effect is a greater exposure to risk, particularly when leadership authority is viewed in conjunction with the allied elements of responsibility and accountability. Moreover, factors such as the influence of the media and in more general terms the tendency for things in organisations to be relatively open to public scrutiny, makes this reality one that warrants special attention. To illustrate this point, one only needs to consider such disastrous industrial accidents as Piper Alpha, Chernobyl and the gas leak involving Union Carbide in Bhopal, India. While these accidents might once have been viewed as tragic events received with fatalistic resignation (Granot 1998), in the post-industrial
leadership context they now have grave strategic implications for the leader as well as for the larger organisations. The extent to which one person can be held responsible is also open to challenge as the following comment by Tariq Aziz, former deputy PM and Foreign Minister of Iraq might suggest. The comment by Aziz is interesting in its attempt to shift responsibility, but under the circumstances though hardly reasonable perhaps also understandable.

“If I am a member of a government that made a mistake in killing someone, there can’t be a direct personal accusation against me. If there is a crime, the moral responsibility rests with the leadership, but a member of the leadership cannot be held personally responsible” (The Age, World 17, Saturday July 3, 2004).

A sociological based explanation of individual and organisational responses builds on de Vries explanation of the tendency by people (followers) not to respond to their leader according to the reality of the situation, but by transference of their emotional legacy (Kets de Vries 1997). This transference of historic hopes and fantasies onto a parent or similar authoritative figure can cause followers to do anything to please their leader, and for leaders in this ‘mutual admiration society’ to only hear and see what they want to hear. The consequence is a distorted view of the world. However, rather than accept a single, individually based clinical explanation as offered by de Vries, there are other viewpoints such as the work by Argyris and his colleagues (Argyris and Schon 1974; Argyris 1976; Argyris 2000) on ‘theories of action’ that offer valid and well researched sociological avenues to understand and mitigate the effect of individual and organisational responses. The theories-of-action viewpoint would suggest that when faced with complex and novel situations individuals may respond with what are inappropriate heuristics in an endeavour to appear in control.

Another perspective is offered by viewing organisations as a social system. This view introduces the notion of “entropy, problems of adaptation, and need for ‘fit’ within the environment” (Mirvis
These factors are particularly relevant to examining the dark side of leadership and to the enactment of theories of action. In an open systems framework, repeated inputs of information and energy will shape patterns of behaviour by demarking boundaries and stimulating differentiation of functions or sub-systems. In time, roles are learned by organisation members and role behaviour becomes habituated. On a collective scale, these stable behaviours form the ‘rules of the game’ and over time become routinized’ in organisations (Katz and Kahn 1978). Problems emerge when role behaviour becomes too rigid, or when it cannot adjust to ambiguity or overload and conflict. *Organisations as a social system* allows people richer sources of feedback and greater personal development through experiential mediums such as role play and simulation approaches that fit the curricula of personal mastery and team learning – two components of the learning organisation.

Finally, viewing *organisations as inquiring systems* suggests that all inquiry is limited because how we study and measure phenomena, influences what we see and calibrate (the Heisenberg uncertainty principle). For example, what decision-makers call facts are essentially values and these values are suppressed in discussions, resulting in subjective views being objectified and intruding into supposed rational decision processes. Another example is the limiting effect words have on our conception of reality and simplify, often at great cost, our pictures of the world. Labelling an issue as a threat or opportunity affects how people think about a situation. Max De Pree, speaking in terms of the importance of relationships, also notes the importance of language and “how it influences behaviour in organisations” (DePree 1999: 22). In summary, what this school of thought highlights is the impact of thinking and of mental models in predicting problem definition and prohibiting what organisations can learn. It also introduces the idea of ‘systems thinking’ focusing attention on interrelationships and interdependencies within the organisation as a whole (Mirvis 1996: 19-20).
A final consideration in relation to the dark side in leader-follower relations is in terms of organisational purpose, or what can also be described as the unifying purpose and ethos of the firm. In discussing Enron and WorldCom, Wallis comments that the tree of the American economy is rooted in the toxic soil of unbridled materialism (Wallis 2002). The greed and absurdity of corporate excess, the costs to the community and the consequent loss of confidence in the corporate sector have prompted closer scrutiny and legislation on corporate governance and an enforcement of professional codes, but one wonders if there might not also be fundamental questions to be asked of the entrepreneurial spirit and social innovation that is fostered by modern market capitalism. If capitalism needs rule, in order that it not become destructive (Leung and Cooper 2003) there is a need to also question the underlying ethos and unifying purpose of capitalism itself. Understanding this relationship will arguably help shape the direction of change. Failure to understand the relationship between ethos and purpose risks more of the same behaviour, and recommendations for improved corporate governance address may only the symptoms of the problems, and not the root causes.

The three most powerful drivers of work behaviour when thinking about managing people and when facing change are identified as purpose, identity and mastery (Moran and Brightman 2001). The role of leaders in developing vision and strategy is also clear in literature (Senge 1995; Scholtes 1998; Mumford, Zaccro et al. 2000). A leader must motivate and inspire their subordinates to be responsive, in creating a shared vision and building a relationship of trust that enables effective implementation of strategy. However, one of the problems faced by modern businesses is the difference between espoused vision and values on the one hand, and the realities of day-to-day operation in a high-achieving organization. No company code of ethics recommends false accounting, tax fraud or securities irregularities; these practices emerge, perhaps slowly, from the experiential level of leadership. Thus, despite public espousal of ethical values, some companies may develop what are toxic values. An example from recent history was
in the US Congressional Hearings into the Enron affair, where Senator Max W. Cleland commented: ‘one of the problems that I saw initially with the Enron leadership was as I said at the first hearing here -- that in combat officers eat last but in this mortal combat of economic competition it seemed that the Enron officers ate first’ (PBS On-Line Newshour). There was a whole culture of intimidation or arrogance, covert operations, off the books, a sense of not leadership but 'bossism. When asked if this is what got Enron in trouble, Sherron Watkins (Enron VP) responded: “Yes, I do, because I think it led good people astray in the fact that they did not question structures that they were not comfortable with” (PBS On-Line Newshour Feb 26 2002).

**Conclusion**

The hidden costs incurred in seeking, accepting and fulfilling leadership responsibility aside, there is argument that any consideration of the dark side of leadership must start with critically examining common understandings associated with leadership. For one thing, there is a need to ask what the general social needs of society are, rather than allow the concept of leadership to service the exclusive needs of a particular corporation or group. Moreover, while we may know the malign side of public leaders such as Hitler, Pol Pot and other more recent examples, it is also important to focus on the ‘leadership process’, particularly in light of the changed emphasis in the role of leaders and the trend towards distributed approaches to leadership. This wider perspective invites a revisit of both the dark and the other side of leadership, where the characteristics of the leader-follower relationship are shared activities rather than atomised into discrete tasks.

The examples cited through this paper highlight the reciprocal and potential negative effect of “dark side” in the leader-follower relationship. For Enron, the U.S. energy giant, inappropriate values in its company ethos meant the end of the line. The repercussions for US Foreign Policy of the Iraq prison scandal could yet have an impact of historic proportions on US relationships worldwide. The dilemma in these cases is summarized by no less a figure than George W. Bush,
43rd President of the United States, defending himself against allegations that his former company, Harken Energy, inflated its reported earnings: “In the corporate world, sometimes things aren’t exactly black and white when it comes to accounting practices” (as reported in *Newsweek*, July 22/29, 2002, p6).

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