

The Leadership Mirage

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August 2024

Rumination concerning peoples' 'leadership qualities' has become somewhat a 'cause celebre' in business world and particularly in business studies courses. Worse still, business psychologists have now got in on the act and have wasted no time in churning out numerous papers looking at how personality, self-identity and individual communicative stances may induce positive (or not so positive) responses from employees (and anyone else those incumbent leaders may be trying to influence).

However, rather than tugging our forelocks and bowing to the potentially pseudo-scientific machinations of business psychology in defining and developing leadership - we should more properly be asking questions about whether allowing psychologists to hold sway in any business program is ethical or not?

If the dark art of psychology actually works – having psychologists lecturing in the subtle signs and ways of *'making your marketing and advertising more effective'* or in *'closing business deals'* or in *'persuasive selling'* somehow seems a tad unethical. Like, perhaps, training people to be better snake oil vendors? How insouciant are we to condone psychology to become embedded in business courses in order to advantage those seeking to engage in commerce rather than making such psychology part of a general education platform for all students to help them avoid being sucked in to unnecessary and acritical financial transactions.

We now inhabit a world in which gambling commercials (presumably honed and tuned in their design and pitch with the help of those steeped in the more effective persuasive techniques and strategies gleaned from years of psychological research) constantly invade our media viewing lives. The leaders of these victim seeking forays into our living rooms are not visible. But somewhere these deleterious strategies are being designed and led. No different in their potential harm to the tobacco and alcohol marketing of yesteryear?

Leadership qualities? Ethics? Integrity? Hard to see where they come in. Or Australia's CFMEU debacle? Leadership herein seems little more than appearing to provide token masking for a coalition of the self-interested. It's impossible to tell what positive qualities are included in analysing leadership in such an environment.

Leadership is, of course, not a destination and at best it is a transient state. Perhaps, unrivalled when unenduring rather than enduring in nature.

The American federal republic has wisely limited its presidential terms so that presidents can only stay in the leadership role for two consecutive terms of office. We well know that those leaders who are long ruling in commerce or politics have a tendency towards autocratic control and despotism. Even today that remains the case. This syndrome seems as true for corporate leaders as it does for political ones. Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un, Vladimir Putin are the current unassailable autocratic heads of state in one party nations. There are plenty of others from history and current politics to also reflect upon.

From 1618 to 1648 the 30 Years War blazed and obliterated cities and communities across Central Europe. It is estimated that over 50% of the German population died during the constant territorial plundering between nations and around 8 million lives were lost. The conflict was religious in nature of course. The division still flares up today in sectarian violence between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and occasionally in Scotland.

Effectively, the current issues in Gaza and Israel are also religious in nature and one might surmise the potential the spreading Middle East conflict also possesses to evoke the involvement of the old religious animosities which were the underpinning of the 12th century crusades across the Holy Lands.

And what does any of this tell us about leadership qualities and values? Well, only that in the 17th century the German territories were poorly led by despotic, inept, vain and greedy leaders who plundered and plundered their opponents, changed allegiances and then plundered again -or were plundered themselves. In the 12th century the Holy Crusades were equally brutal and barbaric but similarly concerned with controlling trade routes, plundering neighbouring societies, social posturing, hereditary and defective leadership and with religious differences being used as an excuse for gaining possession of foreign lands.

And today's leadership scenarios seem no different. Ukraine is being plundered (not terribly effectively) at this moment in time. Parts of the Spratly Islands are being illegally occupied and Malaysian, Vietnamese and Philippine territorial waters are being disputed by China. North and South Korea are still facing off with military threats and displays of firepower. Elon Musk, unmandated, involves himself ever more in global political matters and Donald Trump... Well, Donald does and says whatever takes his fancy.

So, I end this rant (sorry blog) with a question. *Why do our business schools place so much emphasis on valuing the qualities of integrity, ethicality and morality in leadership when the world's most dominant and (arguably) successful leaders clearly seem to entirely lacked any of them?*

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