



# LEADING FOR THE FUTURE

How we can prepare the next generation

By Professor Ben Bryant - May 2010

IMD

Chemin de Bellerive 23  
PO Box 915,  
CH-1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11

Fax: +41 21 618 07 07

info@imd.ch

<http://www.imd.ch>



## LEADING FOR THE FUTURE I How we can prepare the next generation

Leadership is in demand. The complex challenges that face teams, organizations and societies are demanding new ways of thinking about and shaping the future. In spite of decades of leadership research and the increasing demand for better leadership, we still do not have a lot of answers. We have all but given up the idea of a formula for leadership.

Leadership is not an easy term to define. Some define it by differentiating it from management. Some insist on a definition that's measurable in terms of performance or outcomes. But can we define leadership as something that can never be measured such as "not allowing the inevitable to happen". Can we think about leadership as action which avoids the inevitability of human behavior. So much of our behavior is influenced and shaped by things we are not aware of, such that outcomes become predictable.

Over the years there have been competing theories as to what leadership is, each with their own underlying assumptions and related flaws.

### **The scientific era**

This approach understood leadership as a measurable phenomenon. The focus was on fixed characteristics of leaders. The idea was that you measured good leadership by observing people who were successful, perhaps those who made it to the top of the corporate hierarchy or those who achieved great performance. The main problem with this approach was the underlying assumption that power and performance are the outcomes of good leadership. From this perspective, people tended to think that executives who made it to the top were the greatest leaders because they had the most discretion to make decisions, but we understand now that that is not the case. You do not have to look far to see that many of the things that happen in the world are not the result of people wielding hierarchical power.

### **The normative era**

This approach, which came to the fore in the 1980s, looks at leadership in the context of “followership” – why people follow others – as well as the behavior of the leader. It saw us get into arguments about whether people follow tough leaders or people leaders, and then find evidence that both were true. We had other discussions around transformational leadership, which is the vision and the ability to transform by being opportunistic, creative, moral, intellectual, confident, inspirational and empathetic; in effect we ended up with a behavioral checklist that said “here are the behaviors you need to demonstrate to be a leader”.

This was very helpful in many ways, but what it was really saying to people was that they should try to be something that they are not. I think that really finally reached its limits when we started trying to teach people to be more charismatic, because we thought that this was something that people needed to be, and of course you can't really teach people that. You don't even need to be charismatic to exercise leadership. In fact, a lot of people who create real change in the world are not at all charismatic and may indeed be quite obstinate and difficult.

### **The adaptive era**

Today we see leadership as complex, situational and “in the moment”. It is a dynamic interaction between leaders and their contexts, where the best leaders respond to the moment, mindfully. They adapt rapidly to situations, in the moment. No two situations are the same. Mindful leaders appreciate the complexity of the macro and micro aspects of human behavior. The astute leader is not someone who manipulates others into the “right” behaviors but who understands situations and then responds mindfully to them. There is no mechanistic or linear formula for success here; they rely on themselves and their intuition without falling prey to an impulsive response to emotion.

This approach is much more organic than the mechanistic, linear thinking behind the scientific and normative models. At its core is the understanding that unconscious thoughts and feelings are just as important as the conscious, rational, logical mind. So much leadership action is influenced by unconscious thoughts and emotions that we are not normally aware of, unless we learn to pay attention to them. It requires experience, self-awareness and the ability to read situational dynamics.

The starting point for people who want to develop their leadership qualities is, of course, an insight into what's going on inside their own unconscious. Without that no executive will be able to understand what goes on inside anyone else, let alone the complexity of behavior that follows that.

Up until now, digging into the emotions and unconscious thoughts has not been central to leadership development. It is difficult and uncomfortable, especially in formal business settings. We are taught to suppress emotions and not disclose to others if they irritate us or frustrate us. We tell people "fine", or "I'm OK with that", when we are not. We hide our feelings and thoughts from other people, we feel awkward as a result, but these hidden feelings and thoughts drive our behavior.

Essentially, this approach is about the ability to notice your own thoughts, emotions and motivations and to read and sense the same in others. We call this *mindful leadership*, and it's not easy. Being mindful will allow you to detach yourself from situations rather than becoming immersed in mindless conflicts and arguments. Ultimately, with this approach to leadership development, you take control of your own destiny and influence the outcomes of your team and your organization.

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Learn more about mindfulness in the following Tomorrow's Challenge article:

<http://www.imd.ch/research/challenges/TC029-09.cfm>

*Ben Bryant is Professor of Leadership and Organization at IMD. He leads IMD's Mobilizing People program, which enables managers to take their leadership skills to the next level.*

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