On Leadership: Two nouns, and a verb.[1]

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While preparing this paper I asked everyone I ran into what they thought *leadership* was all about, and who were the examples of greats leaders. I quickly found I was not alone in finding this a difficult topic. Are leaders born, or thrown up by the context of their times? Are there different sorts of leaders? Virtually everyone agreed the matter of leadership is a tricky one. So for me this paper is a bit of a journey in which I will explore how the concepts of leadership and leading are defined and used, and talk about some of my own encounters with leaders and leaders I admire or from whom I have learned something. Finally, I turn to the much overblown sub-species of the corporate leader, as remade by Wall Street and the mass media, and argue why these self-proclaimed corporate superstars don't fit the model of leadership to which I believe we should aspire.

Two nouns, and a verb

One of my favourite books is Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, published in 1976. It is an archaeological exploration of the evolution of the key words and the concepts we use to describe and explain the ways our society works. The most familiar words we use - like democracy, family, or culture - end up being very slippery concepts when we try to unpack the meanings that have built up around them. We also keep inventing new words for new concepts: like infrastructure (mid 20th century) and "intellectual property" (mid 1980s).

Unfortunately, Williams' doesn't have an entry for leadership (but I suspect if he were writing the book today he would, given the way the word have become so used and abused). A fall back in situations like this is to go to the full Oxford English Dictionary (which is like having a whole library and history of the world in 20 volumes). Lead, leader and leadership get pages and pages of definition and examples.

"Leadership", "leader", and "to lead": two nouns, and a verb; and each provides a different insight into the subject of leadership.

Leadership

Leadership, a noun, is a relatively late word, emerging in the 19th century to mean the holding of a political or military office.

> *The dignity, office or position of a leader, esp. of a political party; ability to lead; the position of a group of people leading or influencing others within a given context; the group itself; the action or influence necessary for the direction or organisation of effort in a group undertaking….*

It was 1930 before we have the first reference to leadership as a possible character trait (beginning yet another nature versus nurture debate). Then it was 1939 before we have the first use of 'executive leadership'. Thus the use of this latecomer noun tracks the 20th century rise of managerial language.

Leader

The much older noun, leader, is a different beast. Whilst leadership denotes some role or innate quality, the simpler term *leader* is a more direct descriptor of a form of action – it is a word to describe a doing person or action. This word is a respectable 700 years old.

> *1. One who leads*
> *1a. One who leads, precedes as a guide, leads a person by the hand or an animal by a cord….*

> *1b One who has charge of animals* [This reminds us of the derivation of the word manager from the French for a trainer of animals]
> *2. One who leads a body of armed men; a commander, a captain*
> *3a. One who guides others in action or opinion; one who takes the lead in any business, enterprise or movement; one who is followed by disciples or adherents….*
> *4. One who leads a choir or band of dancers, musicians or singers*
> *….*

To lead.

If a leader is a doing person, then its no wonder that the oldest form of this work is the verb form, *to lead*, with the earliest usage dating back to c. 900 AD. That's early English.

It is a word rich in meaning, as the OED indicates 22 forms of usage that have accumulated over the past 1,100 years. These include:

1. *To conduct*
2. *To accompany and show the way to; to conduct, guide; esp to conduct or guide by going on in advance, to cause to follow in one's path. Often with advs. – astray; away*
3. *Of a commander: to march at the head of and direct the movement of…*
4. *To go before or alongside; and guide by direct or indirect contact; to conduct…*
5. *To guide with reference to action or opinion;*

18. *To induce to follow unthinkingly*

   ….

What's the point that emerges from this conceptual archaeology?

The youngest usage – leadership – promotes the topic of leading to a matter for serious study. Just adding that *–ship* to a word puts it on a pedestal. (Like entrepreneurship). It suggests there is a abstract benchmark; an objective character of behaviour or quality which you may have or not have.   It also distinguishes the role from the occupant of a position of command.

On the other hand, the much older and simpler forms of *leader* and *to lead* go directly to the heart of the circumstances of action within a particular context or circumstance. Leaders do things, and make things happen.   This is concrete stuff we can examine and learn from.

The dichotomy I am beginning to unearth here is reinforced by a quick scan of Roget's thesaurus of synonyms.   Leadership doesn't appear – Roget died before we really started to use the word in every sentence - but the tension between the two varieties of leading creep in to his index for "lead":

> superiority; order (rank); pioneer; influence; tend; role; induce; direct; authority

The two camps that emerge here are (i) about status and "office"; and (2) about role and function. In other words, this is the difference between saying "President Bush assumed the leadership of the US", as against saying that "Churchill emerged as a leader for his times" (that is, he was cast into a role and rose to the occasion). These are two very different perspectives and ways of thinking about leading.

I strongly believe language matters because it mirrors the clarity, or otherwise, of our thinking.

Moral Neutrality – the adjectival necessity.

I suspect one of the reasons why so many people I speak with find the concept of leadership deeply problematic is because it is, essentially, a morally and ethically neutral term.   The term, implicitly or explicitly, is usually qualified with an adjective or adverb.   Our two nouns and the verb rarely stand by themselves. We feel the need to add other words to provide a

context.

Hence leadership over the cliff is not necessarily an exemplary quality in the Gadarene swine or in lemmings. One can lead others into the paths of righteousness or shareholder returns, or lead them astray. Thus it is not just the function of leadership we need to look at, but the qualities and uses of that leadership. This introduces the notion of how we *qualify* a leader and set out the qualifications for a leadership role: how we qualify the noun with adjectives. This immediately introduces the moral and ethical dimension inherent in any discussion or analysis of social relationships.

Leadership is an emotive concept because it implies an asymmetrical relationship with other people. You cannot have a leader without followers. And that power relationship between leader and follower can be free or unfree – coerced or with consent.

At one end of the spectrum of power relationships we have the command and control framework associated with military or religious authority; or with the pecking orders of animal herds and hierarchical models for organising human interactions.

At the other end of the spectrum we have the mobiliser, the empowerer, and the guide. Here the leader is the servant of the led.

From this discussion it may follow that the uses or abuses of the act of leading may, in fact, distinguish completely different types of leadership which we might easily confuse. Reciprocal social relations, and non-reciprocal relations, seem to me like chalk and cheese. (For those of you who have dabbled in philosophy, this is a bit like Karl Popper's dichotomy of Open and Closed Societies).

It is also worth considering that, presumably, many of us are simultaneously leaders and followers in different areas of our lives.   It's interesting how little I, for one, reflect on and learn from this obvious point. We know from psychology that *figure:ground* reversal, the changing of perspective, is a powerful guide to insight. Applied to our varying personal experiences of leadership it could be a powerful source of learning. Self awareness is an important attribute in leadership.

Our personal role models.

If I can't supply you with a general theory of leadership at least I can explore with you some examples of the practice of leadership that have inspired or touched me, and examine some of the lessons we might draw from these examples. Of necessity this will be a cursory survey.

Ask everyone for their list of most admired leaders and Nelson Mandela tends to come up tops. I spent quite a bit of time working in South Africa during the transition of power from the apartheid white regime to black democracy in the early 1990s. To me the unsung heroes of that most remarkable achievement, the dismantling of a police state and a transfer of power, are Frederick de Klerk and Archbishop Tutu. De Klerk exemplifies the hardest leadership challenge of passing the baton; ceding leadership to others. Within this context Tutu highlighted the moral dimension of leadership with his emphasis on reconciliation as the underpinning for this pivotal redefinition of social relationships, exemplifying the importance of reciprocity – of informed consent – in the ultimate leadership challenge of successful regime change. In this remarkable South African case study of regime change, we see three great leaders playing crucial and interdependent roles in producing what most of us would deem ethically to be good outcomes. This is a case of group leadership at its best. It is telling that I can think of few comparable corporate examples of regime change. Nor, sadly, do we seem to have applied the lessons from South Africa to the more recent case studies of regime change led by Western powers.

In my own career development, I owe most to one particular manager within Telstra (then Telecom Australia) in the early 1980s. He is Greg Crew, who went on to head up Cable & Wireless in Hong Kong. To him I owe the simple but crucial lesson about the art of knowing

when not to make a decision.   Explicitly not making a decision.   The classic Chinese leadership strategist, Sun Tzu, emphasised this lesson years ago – timing is everything. The precept – "be decisive" - is sometimes very bad advice without this corollary. Be decisive at the right time. Leadership just for leaderships' sake is about the arbitrary demonstration of the power to control; about leadership morphed into megalomania.

Another reason why Greg Crew stood out, for me at least, was that he was multidimensional, or someone we would describe as well-rounded.   A skilled engineer by training, he also spoke Mandarin and was a passionate student of Chinese culture. A teacher in his executive leadership, he was elsewhere a student. In him an innate instinct to explore wider worlds - that quality of intellectual curiosity which we today dumb down as "lifelong learning" - produced that openness of mind which underpins the art of good judgement. An addendum to Greg Crew's maxim about knowing when not to make a decision is the art of sensing what we don't know and dealing with imperfect information. These strike me as important qualities of leadership; important qualifications for leaders.   And this line of reflection reminds me that the most important influences on my life were an extraordinary bunch of school teachers and university lecturers (few of whom, I suspect, would sit comfortably within contemporary educational regimes). I conclude that whilst we may learn something about the forms and rituals of leadership from graduate business schools and management training courses, the sources of the qualities that distinguish one leader from another lie elsewhere.

Of history's great leaders the one I find most fascinating is Napoleon Bonaparte. He is arguably the world's first post-colonial leader. He re-made Europe, for better or worse, and created the antecedents for today's European Union. He reshaped institutions, notably through his legal code, but also in education, urban planning, science and technology.   He was an agent for change *par excellence*. He encountered major reverses, the final terminal. He was both brilliant but flawed – but in both was larger than life. No wonder he has become the clandestine role model and inspiration of many later leaders, including Paul Keating in Australia. What I find fascinating is his complexity. He was an outsider. A post-colonial, he redefined the wellsprings of national pride and achievement. He was intellectually curious, reading widely and voluminously; he was an innovator, transforming military technology and pioneering massive State support for science.   In the midst of war with England, he commissioned Baudin's scientific voyage to Australia.   Sourcing materials from places ranging from Egypt to Australia, he sponsored the idea of national scientific collections.

A contemporary counterpart of Napoleon is Mahathir of Malaysia, a leader whose contribution to modern geo-political discourse has, in my view - based on many years of direct engagement in Malaysia - been sadly misrepresented in the West.   Under Mahathir's long premiership, Malaysia fast tracked two major economic adjustments: the first from an agrarian and resource based economy to an industrialised economy; the second from an industrial focus to a knowledge based economy. Outside Malaysia, Mahathir has been consistent and tireless in championing the voice and distinctive concerns of the "third world" encompassing South America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. With the context of the 20th Century, he has been an archetypical post-colonial leader, focussing recently independent nations on national pride and the possibilities of local sovereignty within a globalised economy. For the West, people like Mahathir are pictured as recalcitrant contrarians that do not play by the rules of the OECD textbook.

I will focus on just four aspect's of Mahathir's leadership. First and foremost, his driving and unswerving vision which has remained remarkably constant over the whole of his political life from his student days. He has wanted Malaysians to become what they could be; he wanted Malaysia to stand proudly in its own right.   Second, he understood the importance of exercising political power in the interests of the people; leadership is about connecting with and touching people in the mundanities of everyday life. Little things matter. Mahathir exemplified this in, for example, fixing the prices for chickens in the lead up to national festivals. Third, in private life and personal encounters he is modest and in conversation he is a keen listener. Finally, he orchestrated a remarkably smooth handover of power to his successor. He passes that final test of leadership: ceding power though a carefully managed transition.

My final example of exemplary leadership is Bishop Michael Challen, who succeeded Peter Hollingsworth as Director of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence. He sensed that the Brotherhood had lost it way precisely because it had grown so much in scale and scope. Under his leadership in the 1990s the Brotherhood reinvented itself, divesting more than half its assets and operations to established local communities or other organisations. In so doing the organisation liberated itself to regain its freedom to be innovative and once more a pioneer in programmes for social justice. I have encountered few corporate leaders who have instigated major changes so purposefully and effectively. As a leader he was a humble man, but with remarkable clarity of purpose and courage. Working with him I always felt I needed to strive to be a better person.

Guides – ancient and modern

In addition to role models, there are no end of text books and manuals for the would-be leader. Few of these have earned a permanent place in my personal library; the clutch of books I keep recommending to people I work with is very short. Ranked simply in terms of chronology this collection includes the following.

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is the Chinese classic primer on the art of leadership, compiled circa 400 – 329 BC. It remains a classic text and recommended reading because it is simple, short and wise. At the core of the book is the precept that the acme of skill is to succeed without a struggle. Histrionics and bravado are not the stuff of outstanding leaders.   What is particularly salutary to note is Sun Tzu's emphasis on ethics and moral character. One of my favourite Renaissance writers[2] later boiled it down to the simple maxim: *reputation and character matter*.

Next, the American writer Gore Vidal's historical novel **Lincoln** is recommended because it provides deep (and well written) insights into the exercise of political power and leadership and because it reminds us that Abraham Lincoln was a most unlikely candidate in the leadership stakes.

Christopher Hitchens' *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (2001) is by the journalist and essayist who achieved a certain notoriety as the devil's advocate against the canonisation of Mother Theresa. Hitchens reminds us that thought leadership requires an independence of mind outside the square of conventional wisdom. Thought leadership is important, requiring people to be brave enough to find themselves ahead of the pack.   Innovators are contrarians. Leadership is one thing; the accolade of great leadership we tend to reserve for transformational leaders; those people who are agents of change for better outcomes. The leader as a change agent provides people with a vision of alternative futures: "windows into realities under construction"[3].   Like Lewis Carroll with *Alice in Wonderland*, this style of leader invites people to step through the window, the looking glass, into a different world.

Finally, there is only one business text on leadership I keep on my bookshelves and thoroughly recommend. This is Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, the report of a Stanford University research project inquiring into the reasons why a few companies have outperformed their peers consistently over many years.   Jim Collins reports how he long resisted attributing success to the CEO as an important factor. But his colleagues, in looking at these great companies from every angle, finally convinced him that the CEOs of these companies seemed different to the Wall Street blueprint of the CEO superstar.   He notes that this special class of leader "embody a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will". Their style tends to be "self-effacing and understated".   Collins comments that these leaders of very successful companies

> "look out the window to attribute success to factors other than themselves. When things go poorly, however, they look in the mirror and blame themselves, taking full responsibility.   The comparison CEOs [of less well performing companies] often did

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[2] Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections of a Renaissance Statesman (Ricordi),* Harper & Row, 1965.
[3] I owe this wonderful phrase to Peter Sellars, the US artistic director and film maker.

just the opposite…"

It never hurts to let facts and hard evidence get in the way of the erroneous popularisation of the ego-driven CEO as a superstar leader. History will – and sometimes does quickly – make a character judgement of these person as flaky, and so should we. I cannot recommend Jim Collins' book too highly for any aspiring corporate leader.

Just four books, but they cover a lot of ground and they are good guides on this topic.

The character of leadership

Reflecting on my own experiences and the people I look up to as role models, and re-reading the guide books I have recommended, I draw four lessons about what makes an effective leader. Effective leaders all share the characteristics of:

- Clarity of purpose and an inner drive to make a difference;
- The instinct and empathy to connect with other people at the level where it matters *for them*;
- Self-confidence to shape a leadership role, rather than just playing out a role; and
- Character - being a well-rounded, multi-dimensional human being with strong ethical and moral values.

I began this essay by exploring the concepts behind the simple words we use to talk about leadership, the act of leading, and being a leader. What makes the difference is the adjectives or adverbs we use to qualify and judge the exercise of leadership. It's not just what we do as leaders, but how and why we do it. I conclude with my working checklist of the seven virtues of great and good leaders:

1. Patience (in timing)
2. Courage
3. Integrity
4. Open-mindedness
5. Respect for other people and their potential
6. Self awareness
7. Modesty in success and, in adversity, unshrinking acceptance of brutal realities.

But I leave the last word to a quote from John Curtin, one of Australia's quiet leaders who would have fitted into Jim Collins' book quite easily, and who said in 1942:

"on what we now do depends everything we may like to do ".