



Leadership, Followership and Problems



A new take on leadership by looking at 'followership' as it relates to leadership styles. The article also explains the challenge of complex 'wicked' problems and proposes that we aim to manage these rather than pretend that we can fix them.

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A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Followership

The focus on followership, rather than, or in addition to, leadership, is a relatively recent phenomenon. This may be because academics have just shifted their focus (Riggio, Chaleff & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Bligh, 2011) but it's just as likely to reflect a growing interest in distributed leadership and partnership working and a growing antipathy towards heroic leaders. This can be seen right across the globe (Gronn, 2011) and particularly within the UK in line with the recent interest in Total Place and Big Society (Grint and Holt, 2011). Even the research that does focus on followers tends to assume that a homogeneous mass exists with little or no internal variation or differentiation (cf. Collinson, 2006; Grint, 2006) or that followers are the consequence of leaders – the dependent variables in organisations where the only independent variables are the leaders (Cf. Shamir, 2007).

However, a relationship-oriented approach to leadership – recognising that we cannot understand leadership in the absence of followership – is also supported by Meindl (1995) whose arguments about the 'Romance of Leadership' suggest that when conditions were either good or poor then followers attributed the cause to good or poor leadership, but when conditions were moderate, leadership was noticeably absent from the minds of followers. In other words, followers are responsible for the construction of leadership as the causal agent in determining events and situations. This approach was taken further by Lord and Brown (2003) who suggested we should work in reverse from the effect to the cause because only in this way could we understand how leaders seem to 'cause' events to occur in the understandings of their followers. This also fits cogently into what we call the 'Command' decision style for our romantic attribution of heroism to commanders ensures a tendency to become enamoured, if not addicted, to command and possibly allergic to leadership with all that this implies for the irresponsibility of followers (Grint, 2011; Lipman-Blumen, 2008). Moreover, there does seem to be considerable evidence that crisis conditions generate the search for charismatic saviours on the part of followers – even to the extent that George W Bush became perceived as charismatic by many followers after – but not before – 9/11 (Bligh et al, 2004).

In fact writers like Pearce and Conger (2003) suggest that the origins of contemporary leadership do not lie in charismatic leadership but in the Industrial Revolution with its master/servant structure. This is most clearly polarised in the scientific management of F.W. Taylor through which all knowledge was stripped from followers and displaced into the management because knowledge control was the mechanism through which followers avoided work rather than through which work was

accomplished (Grint, 1998). Of course, the Master/Slave dichotomy is much older but still resonates with the same asymmetry of power that Taylor sought to (re)introduce and which Henry Ford sought to introduce through technology (Grint, 2001).

Indeed, there are related arguments – for example Rost (1993) is one of the best known and one of the original movers in this direction – that since organisational hierarchies are flattening everywhere and partnerships and distributed leadership are the universal future, followership is now an outmoded concept fit only to be consigned to the dustbin of 19th and 20th century history. Yet most of the empirical evidence suggests that traditional hierarchies are very much alive and well in many organisations in this 'post-industrial' world, that many partnerships are paralysed into inaction by the absence of any agreed decision-making mechanism, and that the only cases of distributed leadership that seem to work are in the educational field or professional service firms (Bolden et al, 2010). Furthermore, the assumption that we can now abandon the word and the world of 'followers' suggests that no critical situations are likely, that no coercive force is available to those who occupy resource-laden positions, and that somehow a land with nothing but leaders, or even no followers or leaders, will function effectively; there is precious little empirical evidence for this assumption.

A rather different explanation for the rise of followership is provided by Bennis (2008: 4) who suggests that it coincides – or rather has been triggered by – the 'the recent tsunami of leaders gone wrong.' There is plenty of empirical evidence of this (Tourish and Vatcha, 2005) but still little on how we might evaluate the role of followers in this age of austerity. In what follows we set out one such framework.

A Typology of Followership

Much of the writing in the field of leadership research is grounded in a typology that distinguishes between Leadership and Management as different forms of authority – that is legitimate power – with leadership tending to embody longer time periods, a more strategic perspective, and a requirement to resolve novel problems. Another way to put this is that the division is rooted partly in the context: management is the equivalent of *déjà vu* (seen this before), whereas leadership is the equivalent of *vu jâdé* (never seen this before). If this is valid, when acting as a manager you are required to engage the requisite process – the standard operating procedure (SOP) – to resolve the problem the last time it emerged. The follower's role in such situations is merely to execute such an SOP – though this 'merely' hides the considerable degree of technical skill that may be necessary for the satisfactory execution of the SOPs. In contrast, when you are acting as a leader you are required to

facilitate the construction of an innovative response to the novel or recalcitrant problem and that must, by definition, involve followers in a much more pro-active role as decision-makers, as co-designers and co-creators of the novel response to the problem or issue.

Management and Leadership, as two forms of authority rooted in the distinction between certainty and uncertainty, can also be related to Rittel and Webber's (1973) typology of Tame and Wicked Problems. A Tame Problem may be complicated but is resolvable through unilinear acts and it is likely to have occurred before. In other words, there is only a limited degree of uncertainty and thus it is associated with Management as the decision-maker. Tame Problems are akin to puzzles – for which there is always an answer. The (scientific) manager's role, therefore, is to provide the appropriate process to solve the problem. Examples would include: timetabling the railways, building a nuclear plant, training the army, or planned heart surgery.

A Wicked Problem is more complex, rather than just complicated – that is, it cannot be removed from its environment, solved, and returned without affecting the environment. Moreover, there is no clear relationship between cause and effect. Such problems are often intractable – for instance, trying to develop a National Health Service (NHS) on the basis of a scientific approach (assuming it was a Tame Problem) would suggest providing everyone with all the services and medicines they required based only on their medical needs. However, with an ageing population, an increasing medical ability to intervene and maintain life, a potentially infinite increase in demand but a finite level of economic resource, there cannot be a scientific solution to the problem of the NHS. In sum we cannot provide everything for everybody for all time; at some point we need to make a political decision about who gets what and based on what criteria. This inherently contested arena is typical of a Wicked Problem.

If we think about the NHS as the NIS – the National Illness Service – then we have a different understanding of the problem because it is essentially a series of Tame Problems: fixing a broken leg is the equivalent of a Tame Problem – there is a scientific solution so that medical professionals in hospitals know how to fix them. But if you run (sorry, crawl) into a restaurant for your broken leg to be fixed it becomes a Wicked Problem because it's unlikely that anyone there will have the knowledge or the resources to fix it. Thus the category of problems is subjective not objective – what kind of a problem you have depends on where you are sitting and what you already know.

Moreover, many of the problems that the NHS deal with – obesity, drug abuse, violence – are not simply problems of health, they are often deeply complex social problems that sit across and between different government departments and institutions so attempts to treat them through a single institutional framework are almost bound to fail. Indeed, because there are often no 'stopping' points with Wicked Problems – that is the point at which the problem is solved (e.g., there will be no more illness because we have 'solved' ill health) – we often end up having to admit that we cannot solve Wicked Problems.

Conventionally, we associate leadership with precisely the opposite – the ability to solve problems, act decisively and to know what to do. But we cannot know how to solve Wicked Problems, and therefore we need to be very wary of acting decisively precisely because we cannot know what to do. If we knew what to do it would be a Tame Problem not a Wicked Problem. Yet the pressure to act decisively often leads us to try to solve the problem as if it was a Tame Problem. When Global Warming first emerged as a problem some of the responses concentrated on solving the problem through science (a Tame response), manifest in the development of biofuels; but we now know that the first generation of biofuels appeared to denude the world of significant food resources so that what looked like a solution actually became another problem. Again, this is typical of what happens when we try to solve Wicked Problems – other problems emerge to compound the original problem. So we can make things better or worse – we can drive our cars more slowly

and less or faster and more – but we may not be able to solve Global Warming, we may just have to learn to live with a different world and make the best of it we can. In other words, we cannot start again and design a perfect future – though many political and religious extremists might want us to.

The 'we' in this is important because it signifies the importance of the collective in addressing Wicked Problems. Tame problems might have individual solutions in the sense that an individual is likely to know how to deal with it. But since Wicked Problems are partly defined by the absence of an answer on the part of the leader then it behoves the individual leader to engage the collective followers in any attempt to come to terms with the problem. In other words, Wicked Problems require the transfer of authority from individual to collective because only collective engagement can hope to address the problem. The uncertainty involved in Wicked Problems implies that leadership, as we are defining it, is not a science but an art – the art of engaging a community in facing up to complex collective problems.

Examples of Wicked Problems would include: developing a transport strategy, or a response to global warming, or a response to anti-social behaviour, or a national health system. Wicked Problems are not necessarily rooted in longer time frames than Tame Problems because oftentimes an issue that appears to be Tame or Critical can be turned into a (temporary) Wicked Problem by delaying the decision. This is particularly appropriate for the third set of problems we will refer to as Critical.

A Critical Problem, e.g. a 'crisis', is presented as self-evident in nature, as encapsulating very little time for decision-making and action, and it is often associated with authoritarianism. Here there is virtually no uncertainty about what needs to be done – at least in the behaviour of the Commander, whose role is to take the required decisive action – that is to provide the answer to the problem, not to engage SOPs (management) or ask questions (leadership). The role of the followers under these conditions is to comply with the demands of the commander.

Translated into Critical Problems we suggest that for such crises we do need decision-makers who are god-like in their decisiveness and their ability to provide the answer to the crisis. And since we reward people who are good in crises – and ignore people who are such good managers that there are very few crises – Commanders soon learn to seek out (or reframe situations as) crises. Of course, it may be that the Commander remains privately uncertain about whether the action is appropriate or the presentation of the situation as a crisis is persuasive, but that uncertainty will probably not be apparent to the followers of the Commander. Examples would include the immediate response to: a major train crash, a leak of radioactivity from a nuclear plant, a military attack, a heart attack, an industrial strike, the loss of employment or a loved one, or a terrorist attack such as 9/11 or the 7/7 bombings in London.

These three forms of authority – Command, Management and Leadership – are, in turn, another way of suggesting that the role of those responsible for decision-making is to find the appropriate Answer, Process and Question to address the problem respectively. This is not meant as a discrete typology but a heuristic device to enable us to understand why those charged with decision-making sometimes appear to act in ways that others find incomprehensible. Thus we are not suggesting that the correct decision-making process lies in the correct analysis of the situation – that would be to generate a deterministic approach – but we are suggesting that decision-makers tend to legitimise their actions on the basis of a persuasive account of the situation. In short, the social construction of the problem legitimises the deployment of a particular form of authority. Moreover, it is often the case that the same individual or group with authority will switch between the Command, Management and Leadership roles as they perceive – and constitute – the problem as Critical, Tame or Wicked, or even as a single problem that itself shifts across these boundaries. Indeed, this movement – often perceived as 'inconsistency' by the decision maker's opponents – is crucial to success as the situation, or at least our

perception of it, changes. The persuasive account of the problem partly rests in the decision-makers access to – and preference for – particular forms of power, and herein lies the irony of ‘leadership’: it remains the most difficult of approaches and one that many decision-makers will often try to avoid at all costs – just at the time when it’s needed!

The notion of ‘power’ also suggests that we need to consider how different approaches to, and forms of, power fit with this typology of authority, and amongst the most useful for our purposes is Etzioni’s (1964) typology of compliance which distinguished between Coercive, Calculative and Normative Compliance. Coercive or physical power was related to total institutions, such as prisons or armies; Calculative Compliance was related to ‘rational’ institutions, such as companies; and Normative Compliance was related to institutions or organisations based on shared values, such as clubs and professional societies. This compliance typology fits well with the typology of problems: Critical Problems are often associated with Coercive Compliance; Tame Problems are associated with Calculative Compliance and Wicked Problems are associated with Normative Compliance – you cannot force people to follow you in addressing a Wicked Problem because the nature of the problem demands that followers have to want to help.

This typology can be plotted along the relationship between two axes as shown in figure 1 below with the vertical axis representing increasing uncertainty about the solution to the problem – in the behaviour of those in authority – and the horizontal axis representing the increasing need for collaboration in resolving the problem.

So far this schema has just focused upon the role of the formal decision-maker – the individual in authority: the leader, manager or commander. But since we cannot analyse leadership of any variety without considering the role of followership it follows that we now need to consider what kind of followership is

required in these ‘situations’, recognising that ‘the situation’ is itself a consequence of contestation and that part of the role of the formal decision-makers is not just to make sense of the situation for their followers but also to break the sense of rival interpretations (Weick, 2001; Grint, 2010: 101). In other words, to delegitimise rival accounts of the situation that challenge the consequential behaviour rooted in the ‘official’ account (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). For example, a critical task of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt at the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution was not just to make sense of the civil turmoil for his followers and those who were politically neutral but also to delegitimise the claims of his rivals about the situation; he failed. This also explains the role of whistle-blowers whose interpretation of the situation demands that they alert other stakeholders to what they believe to be the illegitimate or unwarranted or unethical action or behaviour of leaders (Alford, 2008). Whistle blowing – speaking truth to power – is also a response to an ‘unjust culture’, as opposed to a ‘just culture’ where honestly made individual mistakes are not treated as crimes against humanity but opportunities for collective learning (Dekker, 2008).

In theory, providing the accounts of the decision-makers hold sway then we would expect Compliant Followers in a crisis to acquiesce to their Commander, what we call ‘Technical Followers’ in a Tame situation to execute the standard operating procedures delegated by their Manager, and Responsible Followers in a Wicked situation to take some responsibility for addressing the collective problem. This is shown in figure 2 below.

Of course, the interests of the decision-makers are paramount in the above figure: their interpretations of the situation – and therefore the associated decision-making approach – are tied into the ‘appropriate’ response on the part of the followers. But what happens if the followers contest the ‘official’ interpretation? Amongst other possibilities the following are available. Followers who deny a crisis may rebel against their commander – become ‘Mutineers’; followers who deny the Tame nature of their situation to merely execute the procedures knowing they will not work – ‘work to rule’, in other words, what we call ‘Kafkaesquens’ after Kafka’s rule bound novels and dystopias; and followers who deny the Wicked nature of their situation to refuse to accept collective responsibility for it – Refuseniks, as we call them, not in the original sense of those refused permission to leave (the USSR) but those who refuse to accept collective responsibility. Pericles sums up this latter issue succinctly in his famous ‘Funeral Speech’ when talking about the values that Athenians hold dear: ‘Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well; even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics – this is a peculiarity of ours; we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all’ (Thucydides, 1954: 118-9).

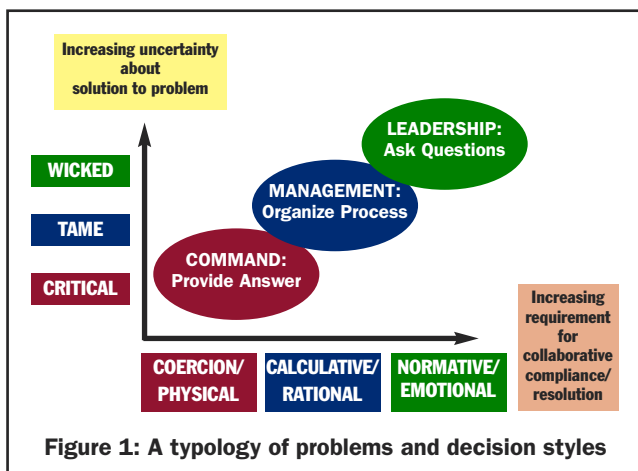


Figure 1: A typology of problems and decision styles

This is represented in figure 3 below.

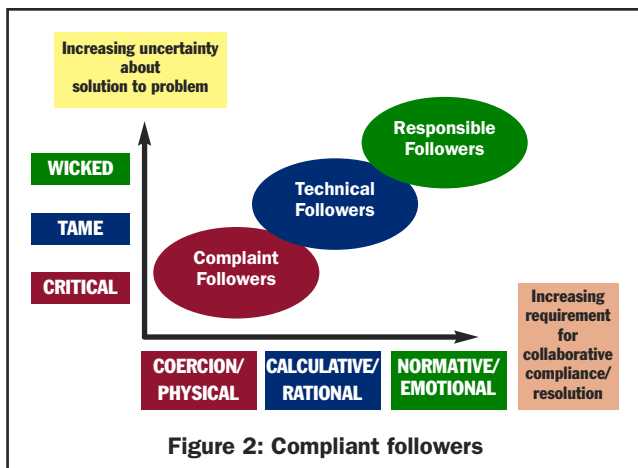


Figure 2: Compliant followers

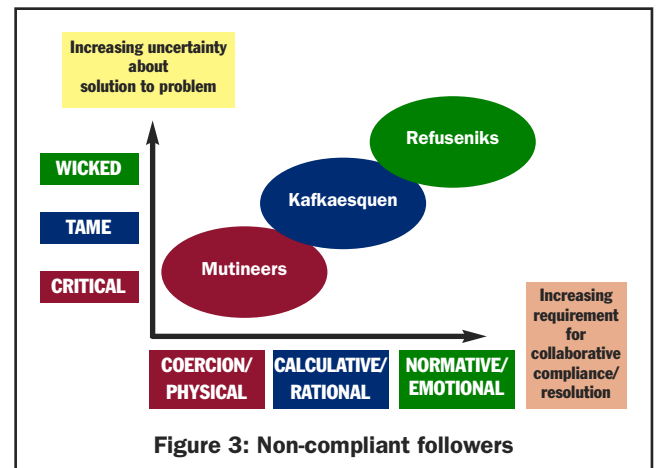


Figure 3: Non-compliant followers

Conclusion

We have suggested that an analysis of leadership requires an analysis of followership since the two elements are relationally critical to each other. This, of course, runs counter to many arguments that are rooted in lists of leadership competencies in so far as these are assumed to operate independently of context or followers. We also suggested that what we normally call 'Leadership' might usefully be termed 'Command' since only this mode of decision-making implies that the decision-maker must know the answer to the problem. Our definition of 'leadership' implies that it is OK not to know all the answers; in other words it legitimates what we already know – that we – as individuals – cannot possibly know all the answers to the world's problems, and it maybe that nobody knows the answer. If this is the case then we need to find ways to manage problems rather than to pretend that we can fix them. Furthermore, this model embodies the relational aspect of organisational life – that you cannot understand leadership without understanding followership and the relationship between the two is the key. Finally, we considered not just what the leadership model implies for compliant followers but what the non-compliant followers imply for leaders.

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