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Leadership Ltd: White Elephant to Wheelwright

By Keith Grint

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Leadership Ltd: White Elephant to Wheelwright

Business history tells us that leaders don't have to be perfect. But they must recognize that their imperfections, their limitations, for example, will doom them to failure unless they rely on their subordinates and followers to fill in the gaps. As this British academic explains and illustrates, leadership is the property and consequence of a community, rather than the property and consequence of an individual leader.

By Keith Grint

Keith Grint is Professor of Leadership Studies and Director of the Lancaster Leadership Centre, Lancaster University Management School. The article is based on his book, *Leadership Ltd.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (2005)

Complaints about leaders and calls for more or better leadership occur on such a regular basis that one would be forgiven for assuming there was a time when good leaders were the norm. But a trawl through the leadership archives reveals no such golden past—there never was a time when heroic leaders were plentiful and solved all our problems. Sadly, this myth of past greatness has set up a model of leadership that few individuals, if any, can ever match. Today's candidates for greatness are shuffled in and out of the top jobs, never quite measuring up to the "great ones" that came before.

The traditional solution to this perceived weakness in contemporary leadership candidates is to demand better recruitment criteria that separate the "weak" from the "strong." However, this only reproduces the problem, rather than solving it. An alternative approach is to start from where we are, instead of

where we would like to be. In other words, we need to accept that all leaders are necessarily flawed, and they are not the embodiments of perfection that we would like them to be.

The traditional approach resembles a "white elephant," defined as both a mythical beast that is itself a deity and an expensive, foolhardy endeavour. In ancient Thailand, the king gave a white elephant to unfavoured nobles because the animal's special dietary and religious requirements would ruin the men.

The white elephant approach to leadership is also reminiscent of Plato's philosophy. In answer to the question "Who should lead us?" Plato said, the wisest among us—the individual with the greatest knowledge, skill, power and resources of all kinds. Plato's leadership criteria has a lot in common with our own, current search for omniscient leaders who are charismatic and larger than life, and who will displace all the bland, miserable failures whom we previously recruited to that same position, using precisely the same selection criteria.

An alternative approach is to work to inhibit and restrain the inherent weakness of leaders. Karl Popper provides a foundation for this approach: Just as we can only disprove rather than prove scientific theories, so we should adopt mechanisms that inhibit leaders rather than surrender ourselves to them. For Popper, democracy was an institutional mechanism for deselection of leaders, rather than a benefit in and of itself. While democratic systems within non-political organizations are a rare find, similar processes ought to be replicable elsewhere. Otherwise, subordinates who question their leader's

direction or skill will continue to be replaced by those who are "more aligned with the current strategic thinking"-otherwise known as Yes People. In turn, such subordinates become transformed into Irresponsible Followers whose advice to their leader is often limited to Destructive Consent: They may know that their leader is wrong, but there are all kinds of reasons not to say as much; hence, they consent to the destruction of their own leader and possibly their own organization.

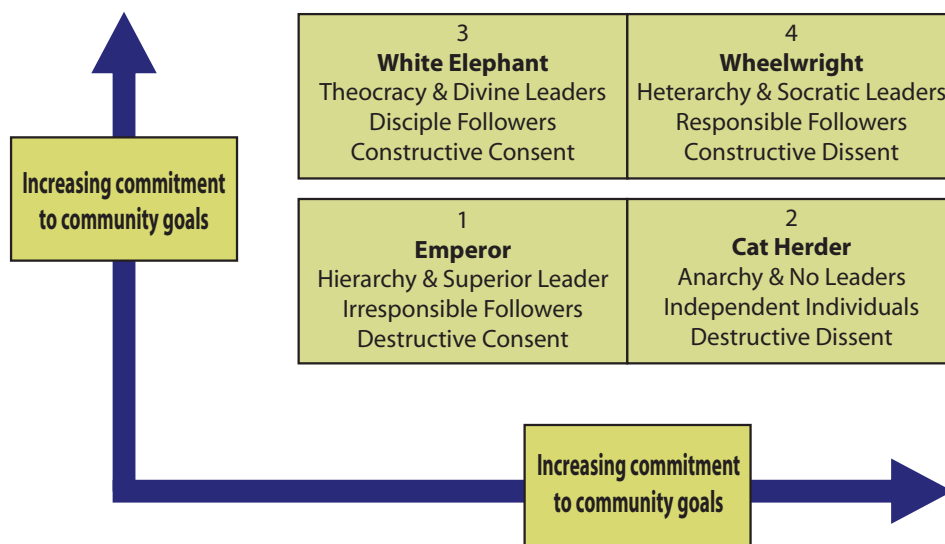
Popper's warnings about leaders, however, suggest that it is the responsibility of followers to remain as Constructive Dissenters. Followers should help to inhibit leaders' errors that might undermine the ability of the organization to achieve its goals. Constructive Dissenters attribute the assumptions of Socratic Ignorance to their leaders, rather than Platonic Knowledge. They know that nobody is omniscient, and they act accordingly.

Of course, for this to work, subordinates need to remain committed to the goals of the organization while retaining their spirit of independence from the whims of their leaders. It is this paradoxical combination of commitment and independence that provides the most fertile ground for Responsible Followers. Four possible ways of linking the issues of commitment and independence are reproduced below:

The emperor: The hierarchy probably contains the most typical form of relationship between leaders and followers. In a conventional hierarchy, a leader is deemed to be superior to his or her followers by dint of superior personal qualities of intelligence, vision, charisma and so on, and is therefore responsible for solving all the problems of the organization. Such imperial ambitions resonate with the label for this form of leader: the emperor. In turn, this arrangement generates followers who are only marginally committed to the organization's goals-often because these are reduced to the personal goals of the leader. The followers remain literally "irresponsible" because of the Destructive Consent associated with the absence of responsibility.

The cat herder is rooted in a similar level of disinterest in the community. But, combined with an increase in the level of independence from the leader, the consequence is a formal "anarchy," without leadership and without the community that supporters of anarchism suggest would automatically flow from the absence of individual leaders. The result is a leader that resembles a herder of cats-an impossible task.

The white elephant generates community spirit in buckets, but only because the leader is deemed to be a deity, a divine leader whose disciples are compelled to obey through religious requirement.



Followers' consent remains constructive if-and only if-the leader is indeed divine. Although many charismatics generate cults that would ostensibly sit within this category, the consent is destructive because the leader is in fact a false god, misleading rather than leading his or her disciples.

The wheelwright denotes an organization where the leaders recognize their own limitations, in the fashion of Socrates. Leadership is distributed according to the perceived requirements of space and time (a rowing squad in which the leadership switches between the cox, the captain, the stroke and the coach, depending on the situation; the English rugby team that won the World Cup in 2003 operated on the same basis, with a formal captain, plus "captains" of the forwards, the backs, the line out and the scrum). That recognition of the limits of any individual leader generates a requirement for Responsible Followers to compensate for these limits, and is best served through Constructive Dissent. Followers are willing to dissent from their leader if the latter is deemed to be acting against the interests of the community.

The recognition that Wheelwrights are reliant upon the knowledge of their subordinates also holds true for the relationship rooted in power. While Plato's White Elephants rest on Mount Olympus like mythical Greek gods, holding irresistible power and manipulating the lives of mortals at will, Popper's Wheelwrights should be resisted for precisely this reason. Yet it should also be self-evident that an individual can have virtually no control over anything or anybody-as an individual. Indeed, we have known for a long time that leaders spend most of their time talking, and not actually "doing" anything.

The real power of leaders

In effect, leaders might pretend to be omnipotent, to have the future of their organizations and its members in their hands, but this can only ever be a

symbolic control, because leaders only get things done through others. In short, the power of leaders is a consequence of the actions of followers rather than a cause of it. Otherwise, no parent would ever be resisted by their children, no CEO would ever face a defeat by the board of directors, no general would suffer a mutiny, and no strikes would ever occur. That they do should lead us to conclude that no leader is omnipotent, and that the kind of leadership is a consequence of the kind of followership, rather than a cause of it.

Emperors might construct formal hierarchies in the hope that subordinates will execute their (im)perfect orders, but Cat Herders seldom even entertain that hope. Popper's Wheelwrights work through networks and relationships because that's where power is actually generated-it is essentially distributed like a wheel, not concentrated in an Emperor, not irresistibly embodied in a White Elephant, and not before a Cat Herder.

None of this is new: Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the Prussian General Staff from 1857-1888, understood Clausewitz's dictum that the local concentration of force was critical for military success. He also recognized that the nascent system of decentralized leadership already present in the Prussian army was crucial to achieving this. After all, a central commander in Berlin, or even a few kilometres behind the battle, had no way of understanding, let alone controlling, what was happening in each and every sector of the battle. The result was a system of leadership rooted in general directives, not specific orders; strategic aims, not operational requirements. This enabled a decentralized control that facilitated distributed leadership and the ability of local ground commanders to seize the initiative rather than await orders.

Perhaps an ancient Chinese story, retold by Phil Jackson, coach of the phenomenally successful Chicago Bulls basketball team, makes this point rather more emphatically. In the 3rd century BC, the

Chinese emperor Liu Bang celebrated his consolidation of China with a banquet, where he sat surrounded by his nobles and military and political experts. Since Liu Bang was neither noble by birth nor an expert in military or political affairs, some of the guests asked one of the military experts, Chen Cen, why Liu Bang was the emperor. In a contemporary setting, the question would probably have been: "What added value does Liu Bang bring to the party?" Chen Cen's response was to ask the questioner a question in return: "What determines the strength of a wheel?" One guest suggested that the strength of the wheel was in its spokes, but Chen Cen countered that two sets of spokes of identical strength did not necessarily make wheels of identical strength. On the contrary, the strength was also affected by the spaces between the spokes, and determining the spaces was the true art of the wheelwright. Thus, while the spokes represent the collective resources necessary to an organization's success-and the resources that the leader lacks-the spaces represent the autonomy for followers to grow into leaders themselves.

In sum, holding together the diversity of talents necessary for organizational success is what distinguishes a successful leader from an unsuccessful one: Leaders don't need to be perfect, but they do have to recognize that their own limitations will ultimately doom them to failure unless they rely upon their subordinate leaders and followers to fill in the gaps. So find a good wheelwright and start the organizational wheel moving. In effect, leadership is the property and consequence of a community, rather than the property and consequence of an individual leader. ■