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Introduction

What do the following people have in common: Margaret Thatcher, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi and Franklin D. Roosevelt? The obvious answer is that they were all famous and successful leaders who achieved a great deal in their lifetimes. Each can teach us something about leadership, and I shall be drawing on some of those lessons in this book.

The problem is that many of the lessons they teach us are contradictory.

From a practical point of view, trying to follow all of these leaders' examples would produce leadership behaviors at odds with each other. As role models they are all good. But as a pool of resources to draw upon they teach us contradictory lessons.

While Thatcher taught us to fight, Gandhi taught us that fighting is futile. While Roosevelt taught us to build, King taught us to dismantle.

It could be suggested that, to some extent, each leader adapted his or her approach to the context of the day. Thatcher found herself faced with what she saw as a sick economy in need of some tough remedies; Gandhi found himself confronted with the British Raj; Roosevelt with a deepening Depression, and King with racial prejudice in America's deep south.

These circumstances are, of course, relevant to their lives and histories. But it would be wrong to deduce from this that the way to lead depends solely upon the demands of circumstance. To select a leadership role model based on the fact that his or her context looks similar to yours would be mistaken or misguided.

The first is that circumstances are never just circumstances: they are how you see them. The second is that what drove the leadership strategies of these four people was their characters far more than the context of their day.

This book is written primarily for the 99 percent of people in leadership positions within the heart of organizations who are not, and probably will not get to the top. Statistically alone, few people make it there. If following carefully in the footsteps of the few, everyone could be guaranteed to get to the top, there would be no one left actually to do the work. At any one time

there are thousands of leaders, most of whom could do better. And this is not because they are doing a bad job. It is because everyone has the capacity to do better the more they practice and learn. What is contained in this book has helped many people who are leaders to be better at leadership.

Leadership is not just for the very few people who head up organizations and states. It is for all those in organizations and society who have influence on others. And that means almost every one of us. You don't have to be a Chief Executive Office (CEO) to be a leader – nor a Prime Minister. You just have to interact with people. And help them to see and do things differently. That's why, day by day, in meetings and casual conversations, we all have the chance to lead.

It will help you see how your own character influences both how you see the circumstances in which you operate, and how best to lead people in those circumstances. It will enable you to develop your own leadership strategy, taking from leadership role models not at random, but in ways that are most likely to be effective for you.

I have been working in leadership development for many years, both with CEOs and other senior managers and with people who are in far less senior roles. The quality of leadership I have found among the people I have worked with is not a function of seniority. Some very senior people have very poor leadership capabilities, while some of the best leaders I have worked with will never head up major organizations – mostly because they don't want to.

Two of my chosen examples of leadership never headed up large formal organizations. Martin Luther King did hold executive positions in a number of Associations and Committees. But his power did not emanate from his roles. It came from the way he behaved as an individual. Gandhi's influence did not come from a position in a political party. It came from his teachings. If you equate leadership success simply with seniority in formal organizations, you may miss the point. And in so doing, miss your chance to be a great leader.

This is not a book about management. Leadership is something anyone can demonstrate, irrespective of their seniority or position. Management is about being formally in charge of things or people, and can involve techniques or rules about how to do it "properly": how to run meetings, how to appraise performance, and so on. Management is, in my experience, something people do at the times when they are not doing the other parts of their job. Their style to management is manifested when they are doing management. But leadership is what one does all day and every day, because it is about how you are, in your character, and how this comes across in what you say and do. A person's management style can, and sometimes is, at odds with how he or she leads people.

This book is not about climbing ladders. It is about becoming the best leader you can be. And that is one reason why I have chosen as my primary case studies leaders from the broader context of politics. I recognize that, for most of my intended readership it is exploring leadership in their roles as professionals or managers that is most important. And I shall use many examples of leaders in organizations as the book develops. But to set the scene most clearly, the four political figures I have chosen not only have had a great deal written about them, that makes it possible to gain a number of different perspectives on their lives and characters, but they are also better known as icons of their own particular ways of leading. Icons but not extremes. If I chose extremes, they would provide far less practical help. A book written on the basis of what we can learn from Hitler, Che Guevara, Jesus Christ and Moses would be fraught with difficulties for obvious reasons.

The people I have chosen can also generate strong feelings. Many people dislike the politics of Margaret Thatcher; Gandhi and Martin Luther King were both assassinated, evidence enough that not everyone loved them; and Roosevelt has had many detractors both in his lifetime and afterwards. But in their own ways, these four people represent both the iconic and the real. Individually, they also represent extremely well the four very distinct approaches to leadership that this book will explore.

One reason for this is that each of them, in their own way, developed and stuck to an approach to leadership that was thoroughly consistent with their characters. If there is one thing on which most writers on leadership now agree it is that effective leadership grows out of what works for the individual leader. For example, in an in-depth survey of 18 successful business leaders, Ruth Tait says, "Almost all . . . spoke about the need to 'know thyself,' to carefully examine one's own strengths, interests, motivation and to choose a career path based on this understanding, rather than on what others or society thought was statusful and worthwhile."¹

People are different from each other. It may also be thought that, if there's one thing each of us knows about, it's ourselves. After all, we've lived with ourselves all our lives. Therefore, it would seem, developing a leadership style based on our own characters should be simple.

In my experience, this is not the case. The fact is that many of us just don't know ourselves well. Many of the less successful people I have worked with fail to achieve what they set out to do because they naively try to follow leadership role models that just don't work for them. Fighters try to be teachers; natural pacifists try to fight; free spirits try to be grown ups; and believers in hierarchy pretend to be democrats. It doesn't work because people see through you. Of course, for all of us, there comes a time to fight for what we believe in; we have lessons to pass on to those who can learn

from us; hierarchies happen and need to be managed; and everyone should have a voice at some time.

As leaders we need to be adaptable and well rounded. But we also need to have a core strategy, a firm and consistent framework upon which to build our unique leadership styles. As Ruth Tait discovered from her conversations with a cross-section of business leaders, “If there was a consensus, it was on the impossibility of defining a set of necessary and sufficient attributes that define leaders – all agreed that business leaders come in all shapes and sizes, with different styles, approaches, strengths and weaknesses.”²

This book provides one way of exploring your own character and the leadership style that will match that character. It is not the only way. People are complex and any model like the one this book uses has its limitations. Therefore I do not see this book attempting to replace any others in the field. Rather it is supplementary. It adds a dimension that I, and almost all the people I have worked with, have found enormously helpful.

In my practical work with leaders I do not place a book in people’s hands and ask them to read it. Those I work with directly want something more accessible and immediate. Among the tools I use in these situations is a suite of questionnaires I have developed over the past 15 years. They help people quickly arrive at some idea of their core characters and how those characters currently inform their leadership styles and their daily lives.

But like most such tools, they have to be used with care. Much of the value of its output comes from talking it through. They are not like questionnaires in weekly magazines; these are fun but harmless, even if, as is always possible, when you fill them in you cheat and lie. It is because we can and often do try to fool ourselves about who we are that debriefing the questionnaires is the most critical part of the process. That is why the questionnaires are not included here. As you read this book, and as you consider what it can tell you about developing your own unique style of leadership it is important that you are as honest with yourself as you can be. Building a leadership strategy on false foundations is dangerous.

Self-deception, the process of having inaccurate impressions of oneself is not a pathology or mental illness. It is extremely common. Among the many hundreds of people I have worked with on the leadership issues covered in this book, a significant number have had to confront some level of self-deception. Usually, it is simply a matter of degree: someone thinking they are more competitive than they are in practice, for example, or, more commonly, less so. But in quite a few cases, it is a difference of kind, in which persons see themselves in a very different light from the “reality” of how they actually live.

One of the most common forms of self-deception I come across is the serious, responsible, and risk-averse individual who, remembering his

heady student days when he partied “every night,” still sees himself as this hedonistic youth. These days the rebellion he sees as a key part of his character is manifested in wearing comical socks.

It may be, and sometimes is the case, that this comical sock-wearer still is a rebel at heart. In such rare cases, it does not take long to surface the deep sense of frustration with life that he feels day in, day out. And usually this is the start of a coaching program that will help him out of his living hell. But in the majority of cases, he really is how he comes across: contented with his lot, but having fond memories – and that is all – of an episode that has long passed.

“The theory of self-deception was foreshadowed by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1959 book ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’, which disputed the romantic notion that behind the masks we show other people is the one true self. No, said Goffman; it’s masks all the way down. Many discoveries in the ensuing decades have borne him out.”³

Some psychologists refer to this kind of self-deception as “character-armour,” “the face the self turns to the world.”⁴ The challenge, if you are to develop a leadership style that will work for you, is to avoid using character-armour on yourself.

That people are able to do so is not only my own experience, but also well researched. What psychologists call “denial,” “reversal,” “projection,” “isolation,” “rationalization,” and “sublimation” are not the preserve of the mentally ill, but what people are inclined to do to themselves whenever it is convenient to the unconscious.⁵

Perhaps the best way you can check yourself for signs of self-deception as you review how you relate to the leadership styles in this book is simply to keep asking yourself, as I do with the people I work with, “Really? Are you sure? Is that what you really believe? And if so, how does this show in how you actually live your life?”

Remember, a common form of rationalization is to blame your current lifestyles on situations for which you “had no choice.” As you read about the leaders in this book, consider what history would have been like if each of them had thought that way.

As you need through the book, you will come across a significant number of questions. These have been brought together in the Appendix, and you may want to work through the questions & exercises in the Appendix as a way of keeping track.

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