



# The leadership disease. . .and its potential cures

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**Abstract** Leadership development and executive education have taken on increased prominence in recent years. The natural tendency is to approach the subject of leadership as a hierarchically-based process that is focused on higher-level individual leaders influencing lower-level followers. This tendency is consistent with myths surrounding charismatic and heroic visionary leaders who are often portrayed as single-handedly inspiring and directing their organizations to new heights. Unfortunately, these simplistic portrayals of leadership are promulgated by the media and desired by the consuming public. However, this kind of framing of leadership is dangerous: it lays the seeds of centralization of power, which can have innumerable detrimental outcomes. Accordingly, we explore two potent antidotes to this simplistic hierarchical formulation of leadership that have become an increasing focus of leadership research: self-leadership and shared leadership.

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## 1. What is the leadership disease?

The business world is plagued by a leadership disease. What is this disease? It is the overly simplistic, formulaic portrayal, encouragement, and development of a centralized, hierarchical model of leadership. To wit, let us review some of the bedrock ideas behind the way leadership is typically viewed and taught. Most leadership definitions point to a focus on influence exerted over human behavior by someone identified as being in the role of a leader. The implication is that there

is more than one person involved, that there is an uneven or imbalanced distribution of power, and that influence is exerted by a person with more power (the leader) over others with less (the followers). This fundamental perspective forms the foundation of much leadership thought that promotes a myopic focus on a centralized and hierarchical approach to the topic. While enlightened consumers of leadership research would claim that views of leadership have progressed beyond the old top-down image of autocratic bosses, leadership nevertheless continues to be widely viewed and taught to executives and managers—even aspiring managers—from the leader-as-a-role perspective, typically held by one person (Pearce & Manz, 2005). We will discuss alternative perspectives later.

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Leaders from positions of authority are taught to direct, incentivize, inspire, and otherwise influence followers who are implied to be subordinate in some way. In fact, practices that incorporate strong, centralized leadership were solidified in managerial scholarship during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are still the primary tools taught today. Elsewhere, the prototypical leader fitting this description has been termed the 'strong man' leader or the 'directive' leader (Manz & Sims, 2001). This type of leadership relies on command and control in order to obtain compliance from followers, often based on fear and intimidation. Other forms of leadership—such as transactional leadership, whereby leaders offer rewards and incentives in exchange for follower compliance—also emphasize a one-way influence perspective of leaders over followers. Even in the case of the often more positively viewed visionary, charismatic, and transformational types of leadership—which rely on factors such as inspirational communication or a unifying vision of purpose—the spotlight is still placed on the leader as the primary source of wisdom.

The reality is that some of the more touted leadership perspectives have come under question by an increasing number of leadership scholars, challenging the romanticized notion of formal leaders: we call this singular perspective a myth (Pearce & Manz, 2005). Yet this perspective remains a significant influence on contemporary organizational thinking and practice. Why? Lord and Mather (1991) point out that the archetypes people tend to possess about how they believe leaders should behave have been shaped by history and are resistant to change. Further, Sims and Gioia (1986) indicate that these archetypes tend to be socially conceived and shared. Add to this the fact that the popular press reinforces these ideas by continually printing articles glorifying or vilifying singular leaders; we suppose that it is simply easier to report organizational outcomes in such a manner. Nonetheless, our MBA students are also to blame here, along with their complicit professors. They demand simplistic models and punish professors, through teaching ratings, who teach more nuanced approaches to the art of influence. Thus, there are many forces at play that reinforce the leadership-as-a-role perspective. That said, we explore some strong historical roots for this perspective in the next section.

## 2. The historical roots of the leadership disease

Let us go back in time a bit to understand how we have arrived at this point. The beginnings of the

formal study of organizational leadership date to the Industrial Revolution. French economist Jean Baptiste Say (1803/1964, p. 330) noted the importance of leadership to economic enterprise, proclaiming that entrepreneurs "must possess the art of supervision and administration." The first large-scale American enterprise, the railroads, necessitated systematic approaches for coordinating and controlling large workforces and geographically dispersed operations that required significant investments of capital. Accordingly, Daniel C. McCallum—a leading thinker at that time—introduced six principles of management, one of which stated that leadership should flow from the top to bottom and rely upon unity of command. These early beginnings paved the way for the centralized, top-heavy model of leadership. Later, in the early 1900s, scientific management further reinforced the dominant views that management and leadership flow in one direction from the top down; in particular, it fostered separation of responsibilities of managers and workers. Managers were responsible for prescribing precise work protocols and workers were to follow the dictates of management. The idea that subordinates could have a role in the process of leadership was largely unthinkable at the time.

Today, the leadership lexicon includes transactional, visionary, and transformational leadership as seeming alternatives to the more autocratic leadership of early organizations. Nevertheless, the notions that leadership is something that primarily resides in a person or a relatively small set of people and tends to flow downward remain firmly ensconced in the vast majority of leadership training and development. To the extent that we continue to develop this persistent leadership model, we allow the insidious festering spread of the leadership disease. Next, we address the outcomes of the leadership disease.

## 3. Manifestations of the leadership disease

Sadly, a wide variety of dire outcomes have resulted from misguided leadership practice. In fact, scandalous examples of leadership corruption and abuse have become so commonplace that there is a danger of being desensitized and accepting them as normal. Relatively recent organizational scandals and apparent ethical shortfalls that have rocked the business world include the likes of Adelphia, Countrywide, Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Toyota, and British Petroleum, to name just a few. Cases such as these have become commonplace to the point that identifying still additional leadership ethical failures has almost

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