

Aesthetic leadership

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Abstract

We introduce aesthetic leadership as a promising approach in leadership studies. Two current movements in leadership research, the inclusion of followers in leadership models and the exploration of subjective leadership qualities, make taking an aesthetic perspective in leadership especially attractive and timely. Aesthetics relates to felt meaning generated from sensory perceptions, and involves subjective, tacit knowledge rooted in feeling and emotion. We believe the aesthetics of leadership is an important, but little understood, aspect of organizational life. For example, while we know followers must attribute leadership qualities such as charisma and authenticity to leaders to allow for social influence, we know little about how these processes operate. We propose that followers use their aesthetic senses in making these assessments. We relate aesthetic leadership to several current topics in leadership research, and outline the assumptions and methods of aesthetic leadership.

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1. Introduction

Leadership research has been watering down the rich phenomena of leadership. Jerry Hunt (1999) was not subtle about the irony when he picked the representative quote: “If leadership is bright orange, then leadership research is slate grey” (Lombardo & McCall, 1978). Part of our enduring romance with leadership comes from its attractive explanatory power in the absence of rational, objective explanations of extraordinary organizational performance. “Leadership” has become the perfect pat response to “the ill-structured problem of comprehending the causal structure of complex, organized systems” (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985, p. 79). Somewhere along the way, “leadership” became a shorthand answer when positive organizational outcomes could not be causally determined. Leadership became the great dumping ground for unexplained variance.

The lofty status to which leadership was elevated, in the stark absence of empirical findings, was Meindl’s premise of the romance of leadership (Meindl, 1995, Meindl et al., 1985). The “romanticized conception of leadership results from a biased preference to understand important but causally indeterminant and ambiguous organizational events and occurrences in terms of leadership” (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 80). Bresnen (1995) also describes how leadership has been socially constructed to explain superior or poor leadership performance.

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We were not in search of excellence as much as we were in search of a way to calm our collective anxiety to explain everything in organizations via scientific realism¹ — a complex we acquired from modeling the social sciences after the natural sciences. If things went from good to great and we were unable to correlate antecedents with outcomes, our catch-all antecedent became “leadership.” We brushed much under this rug. We then pulled a fast one on ourselves. We began looking for antecedents and consequences to leadership. Never mind that leadership itself was ambiguous (Pfeffer, 1977), just so long as we could suggest that anything good in organizations was the result of it. We got so giddy about leadership that we forgot it was our pat answer for the unexplainable, and went about looking for rational, objective, causal explanations, making great efforts to quantify a quality we used to explain what we could not quantify. Kafka would have found this sort of insanity all very delightful, and we might add “leadership tomfoolery” as a symptom of “academic amnesia” (Hunt & Dodge, 2000).

But before one begins to think we are taking leadership to task, we want to make sure we say that we find leadership refers to phenomena we find magically creative, inspirational, and life-full. Our plea is that we might treat it as such. Leadership is a vibrant bright orange, and we are amazed at its resilience in the face of leadership studies hammering it into a shapeless, hapless, colorless, life-less condition. Meindl (1995) was remorseful that so many people took the romance of leadership as a call to abandon leadership studies. Rather, we should take leadership’s larger-than-life role as a demonstration of just how important and significant leadership is for organizational participants as they make sense of their experience. It also denotes a welcomed departure from leader-centric approaches toward more follower-inclusive and social constructionist approaches to leadership. “...the romance of leadership is about the thoughts of followers: how leaders are constructed and represented in their thought systems (Meindl, 1995, p. 330).”

The purpose of this article is to introduce aesthetic leadership as a unique, distinct, and valuable approach within leadership studies. We set out to build a case describing why leadership studies needed to move towards aesthetics, but as we reflected on recent trends in leadership research, it became clear to us that leadership was already moving toward an aesthetic approach. The question then became: Is leadership ready for the place it is already heading? We think it can be, and taking an aesthetic perspective will help leadership studies thrive in the areas it has just begun to venture into. We will explain why we think an aesthetic perspective can benefit leadership studies, and lay out what an aesthetic approach to leadership entails.

We define aesthetics and review the quickly building steam of organizational aesthetics. We will then discuss how aesthetics can complement and offer valuable insights to leadership given current trends in leadership studies. We think leadership is just beginning to grapple with some issues that organizational aesthetics is particularly suited for. In fact, given the combination of current movements in leadership, ones that continue to inch closer and closer to aesthetic issues, it is time that leadership embrace an aesthetic approach. More than demonstrate what aesthetics has to offer some current leadership topics, we hope to introduce a distinct approach within leadership studies — aesthetic leadership.

2. Aesthetics

We should start by saying that aesthetics is not synonymous with art or beauty. When we talk about the aesthetics of leadership we want to avoid any superficial reference to “the art of leadership.” By aesthetics, we refer to *sensory knowledge and felt meaning* of objects and experiences. Reason and logic has often been contrasted with emotion and feeling, but what they both have in common is that they are sources of knowledge and generate meanings we rely and act on. Aesthetics involves meanings we construct based on feelings about what we experience via our senses, as opposed to the meanings we can deduce in the absence of experience, such as mathematics or other realist ways of knowing.

The Greek word *aisthesis* refers to any kind of sensory experience regardless of whether it is sensuous or artistic. Philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten is considered the father of aesthetics. Along with Vico (1744, reprinted in 1948), he contended that knowledge was as much about feelings as it was cognition (Baumgarten, 1750). Aesthetic knowledge involves sensuous perception in and through the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and is inseparable from our direct experience of being in the world (Dewey, 1958; Gagliardi, 1996). The contention that the felt meaning based on

¹ Boal, Hunt, & Jaros (2003) contrast realist ontologies with subjectivism, symbolic/interpretive interactionism, social construction and post-modernism. They further distinguish positivism and scientific realism, which can attend to unobservable phenomena, such as charisma, by making inferences from its effects.

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