



# Leadership

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## Leadership: The Performance of the Community

The collective is the rationale for leadership – only apparently is this core of leadership paradoxical. Leadership, like other aspects of human experience, is marked by biases. In leadership, one such bias favours men over women. Yet, another, more subtle, privileges the leader rather than the group or community. Language is an illustrative example. Calling members of the group ‘followers’ is hardly a motivating or dignifying expression. Nonetheless, leadership is precisely about groups and communities.

Like many social phenomena, leadership was invented by no one: it emerged among human beings – indeed, among living beings – millions of years ago. Evolutionary theories of leadership<sup>1</sup> show that leadership predates the human species. It is a phenomenon present in most social dynamics of living organisms: in ants and fish, in lions, birds, and monkeys. Other animals, such as buffalo or cattle, live in herds without leaders. At times, they pay a heavy price for that: decisionmaking is slow, exploratory movements take time, they often choose too late which route to take, and many die. It may well be that the underlying reason why, throughout history, led groups prevailed over leaderless groups lies in the speed of decisionmaking – one being taking one decision for the whole group. The speed of decision compensates for the errors of decisions. Amazon’s leadership principles<sup>2</sup> mirror this aspect, highlighting the importance of not delaying decisions, because hesitation clogs the

<sup>1</sup> Van Vugt, M. and Ahuja, A. (2010) *Selected: why some people lead, why others follow and why it matters*. London: Profile Books

<sup>2</sup> <https://amazon.jobs/content/en/our-workplace/leadership-principles>, ‘bias for action’ leadership principle.

organisation, reduces productivity, and – crucially – because most wrong decisions can be reversed easily and without major cost.

Thus, the question becomes: if someone decides, will he/she be followed? Does he/she motivate and inspire others? Does he/she provide security and confidence? Leadership is never effective when it rests primarily on hierarchical position. Example, courage, the ability to take risks and to decide, technical competence, empathy, and relational skills are always important dimensions of a leader's practice.

In a passage from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*,<sup>3</sup> the rebel Glendower talks with Henry Percy as they conspire against the king. Each, with his own agenda for power, mocks the other, each implying he possesses greater powers than the other and that he can achieve more. Glendower boasts to Percy: "I can call spirits from the vasty deep!" Percy replies, downplaying the remark and drawing attention to something fundamental about leadership: "Why, so can I, or so can any man... But will they come when you do call for them?" To lead is to be followed.

Why is a leader followed? Scientific research on leadership has shown that there are competent individuals who do not lead effectively – who are not easily followed. They do not decide, do not inspire, do not take risks, do not set an example, and shy away from change. At the centre of leadership dynamics, as Freud<sup>4</sup> suggested, lies the emotional bond – the emotions that the leader can evoke within the community, the engagement and identification that groups develop with the leader's vision and example.

For many thousands of years, oratorical skill has been viewed as an indicator of intelligence and potential for leadership. In a world without information – a largely unknown world – speaking well and explaining situations clearly could be decisive for a group's survival; it amounted to influence. This trait persists today. Indeed, in a world saturated with information, uncertainty also persists. Good communicators continue to be perceived as good leaders. Leadership correlates positively with extroversion – sociability, the ability to get along with others, and working easily and effectively in communities. Openness to new experiences also enhances leadership effectiveness. After all, to lead is to go ahead, to anticipate, to initiate something new. On the contrary, nervousness is

3 Shakespeare, William (2005) *Henry IV, Part One*. International Edition. London: Penguin

4 Freud, Sigmund (1991) "Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego" in *Civilization, Society and Religion* Vol. 12. London: Penguin

poorly aligned with leadership; who wishes to be led by someone who is visibly anxious?

In our time, constantly immersed in thousands of stories, being able to attract attention increases one's influence. Following those in the spotlight is an ancient behaviour, which Van Vugt<sup>5</sup> argues dates to the Stone Age, when following the right leaders literally meant survival. For this reason, even today, widespread attention tends to be interpreted as a signal that a person is worth following.

For decades, leadership studies have moved away from personality and from the old idea of innate leadership – of those who are “born to lead.” Personality, of course, matters. Yet distinct personalities can lead effectively, and people with similar personalities may perform very differently in leadership roles. Moreover, research<sup>6</sup> shows that personality changes over the course of life for at least one third of the individuals.

A leader may behave in many ways: focusing on tasks, deadlines, and details; being concerned with technical competence (their own and that of others); paying close attention to budgets; or being preoccupied with power, roles, and positions. Many behaviours can be displayed by leaders, but research suggests that only two behavioural patterns are consistently effective: a constant focus on tasks, details, deadlines, and objectives; and a sustained focus on good relationships – empathy, listening, and involving others.

Each of us might find one of these dimensions easier than the other. Those with a Type A personality – driven by urgency, goalorientation, and competitiveness – tend to become taskoriented leaders. Those with a Type B personality – focused on harmony and empathy – tend to become relationshiporiented leaders. Both types of leaders can be effective; yet sometimes they are not. High motivation is futile if objectives are not met. And, at times, intense pressure to achieve objectives is precisely what causes failure. For a great deal, leadership effectiveness is situational.

If the core and justification of leadership lie in the group, its essence may well be this: will you be followed? Why is a leader followed? Because he/she knows more, some will argue; because he/she is technically competent. Yes and no: many competent people are unable to lead; they do not decide, they lack courage, they set no example, or they simply do

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5 Van Vugt and Ahuja (2010) *Selected: why some people lead, why others follow and why it matters*. London: Profile Books

6 The Longevity Project, <https://www.longevity-project.com/>, Jan 26<sup>th</sup> 2026

not wish to lead. Others argue that a leader is followed because he/she takes risks. This is important, but excessive risktaking often makes a bad leader. Some situations demand careful deliberation rather than boldness. Still others claim that a leader is followed because he/she engages their team, motivates them, and recognises their value. Undeniably important – yet without technical competence, decisionmaking, and the willingness to confront problems, those aspects might be insufficient.

Who, then, is the best leader? It depends. It depends on the situation, the organisation, the objectives, the activity, the professionals who work with the leader, their capabilities, and their motivation. In *The Art of War*, the 2,500-year-old Chinese treatise by Sun Tzu,<sup>7</sup> we read that one never knows who will become the best leader: “How will the terrain of battle be? How will the weather be? What will be the morale of our troops and those of the enemy? Who will decide better and faster? Many are the uncertainties...” Yet, Sun Tzu concludes, “the worst leader is not difficult to recognise... it is always someone very courageous... and very incompetent. He is the one who most swiftly leads to disaster.”

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7 Sun Tzu (1995) *The Art of War*. New York: Westview