

## THE ORIGINS OF LEADERSHIP

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### Abstract

The purposes of this paper are to outline the origins of leadership and explain its role in human civilization. The methodology is analytical and discursive. The paper addresses three themes: leadership as a social institution, a field of inquiry, and as a vocation. The research is based on a survey of the leadership literature. The discussion is organized thematically. The paper offers five principal conclusions: leadership is ancient, a universal social institution, a key determinant of progress in human civilization, a new field of inquiry, and that the job of leader is poorly understood.

## THE ORIGINS OF LEADERSHIP

### INTRODUCTION

While leadership has been an enduring phenomenon in the human experience many people do not fully appreciate either its origins or roles in society. The purposes of this paper are to outline the origins of leadership and explain its roles in human civilization. Three themes will serve as organizers for the discussion: leadership as a social institution, field of inquiry, and vocation. Leadership is frequently defined in terms of the leader rather than as an institution that seeks to serve society.

### LEADERSHIP AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

The phenomenon of leadership parallels the evolution of human society. In fact, leadership is a central theme in human history. The history of leadership is as ancient as that of mankind. Leadership can be understood in terms of its social functions. As an institution, leadership has an enormous impact on society. While these are weighty topics, we have to be satisfied with a brief treatment of each in this paper.

Leadership is a universal social institution: "No societies are known that do not have leadership in some aspects of their social life, although many may lack a single overall leader to make and enforce decisions" (Bass, 1995a:6). While human beings vary by almost every conceivable indicator, including race, ethnicity, religion, physical attributes, culture, custom, politics, economics, and environment, every group has a leader.

Leadership is also at the center of every cultural tradition: "All societies have created myths to provide plausible and acceptable explanations for the dominance of their leaders and the submission of their subordinates" (Bass, 1995b:50). It is quite possible that leadership was our first political institution.

Leadership is a primary social institution and "leaders have existed for as long as mankind has been civilized" (Sarros, 1992:21). While leadership may be a social universal, the history of leadership is a long and complex tapestry of human experiences.

Leadership was a subject of interest in all the great civilizations (Bass, 1995b:50-51). The societies of classical Egypt, China, Greece and Rome shared an interest in the institution of leadership. Europe, after the Reformation and during the Renaissance, also came to appreciate the importance of leadership.

The pivotal importance of leadership is reflected in the cultural artifacts of many societies (Bass, 1995a:5). Egyptian hieroglyphics referred to "leadership" 5000 years ago. Chinese classical literature provided guidance and advice to leaders as early as 5000 B.C. Greek literature, such as Homer's *Iliad*, provided metaphorical lessons for leaders. These cultural factors are not without contemporary import. Latemore and Callan (1998:78) argued that the heroic archetypes of Greek literature are very relevant to modern managers and leaders. Bass (1995b:51) identified the leadership qualities and ideals that were imbedded in classical Greek literature, namely (1) Justice and judgment by Agamemnon, (2) Wisdom and counsel by Nestor, (3) Shrewdness and cunning by Odysseus, and (4) Valor and activism by Achilles.

Although not until much later, leadership became an important subject in European society. Writing in 1513, Machiavelli provided detailed advice for political leaders (Bass, 1995a:5), maintaining that "leaders needed steadiness, firmness, and concern for the maintenance of authority, power, and order in government" (Bass, 1995b:51). Similar to earlier Chinese writers, Machiavelli offered advice and guidance to political leaders of the day.

The European concern for the institution of leadership continued in both Victorian and Post-Victorian eras. For example, Hagedorn's concept of leadership training, which required that a leader first be a follower, was emulated in European military circles. It was later transferred to the Americas where today it is invoked in military academies such as West Point in the United States (Bass, 1995b:52).

The concept of leadership has been imbedded in Western literature, language and scientific thinking since at least biblical times (Van Seters & Field, 1990:29-45). By about 1300 A.D., the word "leader" was in use in the English language. By the 1700's, "leadership" was framed as a scientific concept (Stogdill, 1974). By the 1900's, scientific research on leadership was underway (Van Seters & Field, 1990:29).

The idea of leadership is ancient, even timeless. As a concept, leadership has grown, developed and been transferred across all major civilizations, cultures and historical epochs. Leadership is truly a universal social institution. Over the millennia, leaders have emerged to meet the challenges of their time and place in history (Sarros, 1992:22).

As an institution, leadership can be defined in terms of its utility to society. The social functions of leadership include completion of critical tasks, solution of important problems, and changing of peoples' mind sets (Bass, 1995a:11). This interpretation of the social purposes of leadership focuses on the political, military and social aspects of life. However, the last half century has witnessed the rise of economic enterprise as a key social imperative.

Economics, business and now a rapidly globalizing economic system have created new challenges and opportunities for the institution of leadership. According to Latemore and Callan (1998:81), a concern for business is the life blood of post-modern society: "The new basis for competitive success will be better leadership and communications skills, more sophisticated use of information, and an ability to manage key external relationships". While times and priorities change, the need for leadership in society does not appear to diminish.

As an institution, leadership has a clear and direct impact upon the society it serves. Sarros (1992:27) claimed that leaders are important functionaries in all societies: "Leaders have an immense impact on social and cultural systems, and therefore they are morally bound to exercise leadership with discretion and consideration of the general good, not the individual triumph." The obligation of the office of leader, and the collective expectations of followers, conspire to complicate any leader's job. Society also has ways of imposing a cynical hypocrisy upon its leaders: "We clamor for strong leadership when we want something done but complain when a strong leader tries to do something that we oppose" (Nice, 1998:330). The job description of leader ought to contain a warning: 'Beware of your followers, they may change their minds and turn on you!' The ambivalence of people to their leaders is an integral component of leadership as a social institution.

To sum up, leadership has played a pivotal role in the evolution of human civilization. The history of leadership can be traced to the earliest times. Leaders and leadership have always played a special role in society. The nature and quality of leadership is important to the direction and success of society. A parallel to leadership as a social institution has been the emergence of it as a field of academic inquiry.

## **LEADERSHIP AS A FIELD OF INQUIRY**

The field of leadership studies is something of a contradiction. It represents an ancient human interest yet has only recently been organized as an academic discipline. Paradoxically, the history of inquiry into leadership is long and venerable. The classic approach to leadership study has an enduring value, even in the context of modern social science. The contemporary status of leadership studies, however, is something of an enigma. These points require further elaboration.

### **A Brief History Of Inquiry Into Leadership**

Bernard Bass (1995b:50) managed to locate leadership on the historical stage of human inquiry:

The study of leadership rivals in age the emergence of civilization, which shaped its leaders as much as it was shaped by them. From its infancy, the study of history has been the study of leaders – what they did and why they did it. Over the centuries, the effort to formulate

principles of leadership spread from the study of history and the philosophy associated with it to all the developing social sciences.

Like so many of the social sciences, leadership studies emerged from our fascination with the past and our formal study of human history. "Leadership is one of the world's oldest preoccupations. The understanding of leadership has figured strongly in the quest for knowledge" (Bass, 1995a:5).

The study of leadership has included every epistemology available to students of the human experience. Much of the contemporary research on leadership is framed in the context of methodology developed in the physical sciences over the last half millennia (Terry, 1995:517-518). As a result, leadership studies strive to be a scientific inquiry. The scientific method, invented by physical scientists and adopted in the social sciences, continues to be employed. Consequently, quantitative research methodology is popular. However and recently, qualitative methods have begun to increase in importance and application (Bryman, 1992, 1995; Bryman, Stephens and a Campo, 1996).

Along this intellectual journey, leadership studies has taken many twists and turns. In fact, Van Seters & Field (1990:30-33) have identified ten eras in the history of leadership study: (1) Personality Era, (2) Influence Era, (3) Behaviour Era, (4) Situation Era, (5) Contingency Era, (6) Transaction Era, (7) Anti-leadership Era, (8) Culture Era, (9) Transformational Era, and (10) Future Era.

Limitations of space prevent further exploration of the exact nature of these milestones in leadership thinking. Suffice to say that "each new era evolved after a realization that the existing era of understanding was inadequate to explain the leadership phenomenon, and poorly adapted to serve useful practical application" (Van Seters & Field, 1990:39). Despite a tendency for academic inquiry to emulate fad and fashion, the value of classical thinking has endured.

Some commentators aggressively champion the value of the classics for leadership studies. Latemore and Callan (1998:84) argued that "...the messages from the Odyssean journey mix well with modern views about transformational leadership". Nice (1998:321) and Johnson (2000) stressed the relevance of classic works for the study of leadership. For those interested in the study of warrior leadership, Nice (1998) recommended the following texts: *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu (400 B.C.); *Book of Sirach* in The Old Testament (180 B.C.); *The Prince* by Machiavelli (1514 A.D.); *A Book of Five Rings* by Musachi (1645 A.D.); and, *On War* by Clausewitz (1832 A.D.). These classic works on leadership are studied by professional military officers and political leaders in many countries.

Not to be left out, commentators on business leadership have produced historical case studies of captains of industry and business tycoons such as Andrew Carnegie (Wren & Greenwood, 1998). The leadership principles practised by business titans form a growing corpus of leadership pedagogy employed by business schools and executive training institutes worldwide.

If the history of leadership inquiry seems fairly clear, the same can not be said for contemporary leadership studies. Bass (1995a:12) insisted that leadership was an important area for study and research. The volume of published leadership research is testimony to continuing interest in the subject. Naturally, there are critics who argue that leadership studies has produced little that is new except some research techniques (Greenwood, 1996:13). The status of contemporary leadership research is best summed up by Latemore and Callan (1998:76): "There is no single theory of leadership that is accepted by researchers, leaders or managers." Leadership appears to be a significant, but rudderless ship of inquiry.

While a great deal of information is available about the academic inquiry into leadership, the world of the professional leader is more obscure. Ironically, while leadership is acknowledged as a profession, the vocation of leader is poorly understood.

## **LEADERSHIP AS A VOCATION**

At some distant, but unknown, point in the history of leadership the job of leader was invented: "Leaders as prophets, priests, chiefs and kings served as symbols, representatives, and models for their people..." (Bass, 1995a:5). While leaders appeared in many forms and offices, the job of leader was central to the development of society: "The genius of the leader is the ability to synthesize and unify a wide range of views, opinion and people towards establishing a shared future" (Latimore & Callan, 1998:83). The primary purpose of the leader's role is to serve people and orchestrate the destiny of society. How leaders actually do this, and how they learn the basics of their profession in the first place, remains unclear. Some would argue that "...modern leaders can learn from the heroes and heroines of yesterday, especially about the symbolic value of providing courageous role models" (Latimore & Callan, 1998:79).

## **SUMMARY**

The origins of leadership are anchored in antiquity. Without the emergence of leadership as a social institution it is uncertain if civilization could have been possible. Without the evolution of leadership as a field of inquiry it is unclear whether we could understand the human experience as we do. Without the transformation of leadership from an institution to a job for individual leaders, it is doubtful if progress would have been the defining characteristic of human beings.

## **CONCLUSION**

The origins of leadership are ancient. Leadership is a universal social institution. It has played a key role in the evolution of human civilization. Leadership is relatively new as a field of inquiry. The profession of leader greatly pre-dates the emergence of leadership as a formal academic discipline. This historical fact probably accounts for why the job of leader is poorly understood. Ironically, the job of leader and the profession of leadership are key arbiters of progress in society.

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