

Pathway to responsible leadership

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Abstract

Despite the many publicised examples of self-serving and even incompetent leaders, corporate leaders generally do have the best interests of those they represent at heart and use the tools and abilities available to them to respond to environmental challenges, create meaning for employees and harness the energy of others. However, the rate and scope of change, the challenges posed by persistent and worsening social, health, economic and environmental conditions, exacerbated by geopolitical and structural constraints, present a level of complexity that defies simple analyses and, therefore, may impact negatively on appropriate leader responses. Leadership and change management must be supported by all parts of the organisation working together harmoniously. We argue that responsible leadership needs to focus on the strategic alignment and fit of the leader against overarching global goals, and adopt an expanded view of leadership that shares responsibility without diluting accountability. We further argue that a broader framework is required than sustainability, one that begins by recognising the totality of global resources as a zero sum equation with finite resources and unequal distribution. This paper suggests that the emerging area of 'distributed leadership' may be a pathway to realising responsible leadership.

Pathway to responsible leadership

Good leadership has never been more needed than it is today. The apparent failure to deal with the major global problems of pollution, poverty, economics, and health, incline to characterise corporate leaders as self-serving or incompetent - and examples are not hard to find (Fulmer 2005; Burke 2006; Maak and Pless 2006; Kapucu and Van Wart 2008). A more constructive view is, perhaps, to allow that 'leaders' generally do have the best interests of those they represent at heart and use the tools and abilities available to them to respond to environmental challenges, create meaning and harness the energy and actions of others. We use the term 'environmental' here generically, drawing on organic metaphors, to suggest that leaders attempt to respond to environmental change to ensure the survival and prosperity of their organisation and satisfy stakeholder interests. We argue, however, that the rate and scope of change, the challenges posed by persistent and worsening social, health, economic and environmental issues, and geopolitical and structural constraints, present a level of complexity that defies simple analyses and, therefore, the development of appropriate leader responses (Useem 2005). Drawing further on the organic metaphor, we submit that leadership and change management must be supported by all parts of the 'organism' working together and contributing harmoniously. We begin with a discussion of 'sustainability', followed by a closer look at 'responsible leadership' and contextual issues, and the paper concludes with suggestions for inclusive, responsible leadership, drawing on lessons learned from distributed leadership models. We argue that responsible leadership should be less about the study of the individual leader and more about strategic alignment and fit of the leader to the circumstances and time, advocating an expanded view of leadership that shares responsibility without diluting accountability.

The 'sustainability' paradigm and its limitations

Schumacher (1973) wrote a text that was, for a time, standard reading in economics (*Small is beautiful*). Although many of his dire predictions have

failed to materialise, an important observation was that raw materials are, generally, non-renewable yet we continue to treat these inputs as inexhaustible commodities. An inevitable consequence of growth and consumption is depletion of resources and production of unwanted by-products, that is, pollution. The economic system requires consumers, and leaders struggle to satisfy stakeholder-interests and hunger for market share, while balancing consideration of broader human needs and care-taking responsibilities (Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

We believe that a broader framework than sustainability is required, one that begins by recognising the totality of global needs as a zero-sum equation with finite resources and unequal distribution. This leads to the question of exactly what this thing called 'sustainability' is. Collins and Porras (cited in Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p.5) suggest that sustainable companies "put purpose before profit", even in the face of change, advance persistently, experiment, develop their people as leaders, and persevere in managed change. Batstone (in Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), arguing in the education context, suggests that sustainable leaders are accountable for the organisation's viability, maintaining transparency, observing community obligations, maintaining integrity, treating workers fairly, managing the negative impacts on the environment, and demonstrating humanity. Hargreaves and Fink (2006, pp. 18-20) outline seven principles of sustainability including depth "leadership for learning and leadership for caring for and among others"; length – leadership that endures over time and across generations; breadth – distributed leadership; justice that "does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment"; diversity that is non-linear, strong and creates networking and cohesion; resourcefulness that develops material and human resources without depleting them, and a conservation approach that "honours and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future". In addition to providing cross-disciplinary principles, education is considered as vital in nurturing the attitudes and skills necessary for developing responsible leaders. They add that developmental action is required for sustainability that includes succession planning, grooming, identifying potential successors, exposing to them all aspects of the

position, shadowing, mentoring and coaching, training, providing stretch goals and tasks, and giving regular feedback.

Sustainability that seeks to serve the interests of others requires a shift from individualistic societies “centred on personal material advancement” to a society which emphasises

community relationships over individual autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation, quality of life over accumulation of wealth, sustainable development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelenting toil, universal rights and the rights of nature over property rights and global cooperation over the unilateral exercise of power (Rifkin 2004 cited in Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p.150).

There is little argument that world conditions are likely to continue to deteriorate unless efforts are made to address pressing issues, ranging from the biosphere to the individual. Thus sustainability, as the term is commonly used, may be applied in three basic ways: (1) an attempt to reverse the negative effects of human intervention; or (2) maintaining the status quo, balancing the inputs and outputs to carry on ‘business as usual’; or (3) treating the future as one of inevitable decline and intervening sufficiently to slow the degradation of areas and enterprises deemed important (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). We submit that options 2 and 3 are unlikely to succeed, primarily because the totality of the system components and their interactions exceed our current ability to grasp, let alone form coherent responses, thus a ‘tipping point’ may be reached through neglect or even as an unintended consequence of ad hoc or poorly integrated interventions (Gladwell 2000). Further, unequal distribution of resources and systemic influences (that is geopolitics, capitalism, vested interests) often render good intentions ineffective. What has this to do with leadership? Simply put, a leader cannot lead if he or she does not know where they are going. Thus, leadership begins, not with influential stakeholders or a ‘triple bottom line’, but genuine coordination and focus of expertise to identify and prioritise the key issues that comprise our global strategic objectives. Thus, responsible leadership goes beyond mere sustainability. Leader selection is not the beginning but,

rather, the end point and consequence of a planned global strategic approach.

Responsible leadership and a global perspective

As we know from basic management theory – ‘that which gets measured gets done (or managed)’. While there are considerable implications in adopting a global perspective - for incentive remuneration strategies for CEOs, government intervention, legislation and policy and the like - it is important not to get caught up in the detail too early in the process, such that the apparent complexity discourages coming to grips with the basic issues and implications for leadership.

Traditionally, strategy making begins with a vision; this is translated into a mission with a number of goals and conditions. Strategy seeks to bridge the gap from vision to reality through strategic goals, objectives and performance measures (Hitt, Ireland et al. 2005). Our argument is that this process must precede enacted leadership as a planned process, and that the leader and leadership training must have as its aim the identification of key leadership characteristics and meta-skills (such as communication, problem solving, change management and the like) that enable the selection of leaders to align with and deliver strategic objectives at a given time and place, for a given purpose. For example: we have all heard of the brilliant war-time leader who was quickly removed after the cessation of hostilities, when their personality and skills no longer aligned with the needs of their constituencies. In like manner, it should not be assumed that a leader appropriate to the current situation will remain so, and systems should be responsive to feedback, against evolving higher-level strategic objectives, to replace a leader or shift that person to a role suited to his or her skill set (Quinn 2004). This, of course, happens in everyday life. But it generally occurs from negative feedback, as opposed to a planned process against overarching strategy. The negative feedback approach seldom promotes good results for the firm or the individual (Farquhar 1994).

There are, as we know, many bodies constituted to address global issues, across different levels and time frames. Too often interventions represent tools and tactics of geopolitical advantage and perpetuation of

unequal distribution. Yet, even with good intent - and there is considerable good intention in the vast majority of humanitarian effort – there continues to be a piece meal approach that does not measure the effort of the bodies concerned and their leadership against overarching, collective, global objectives (Moore 2003).

Much of the above may sound like rhetoric and, perhaps, give the impression that it is really all too hard (or, conversely, that it is all too easy). That is not the point being made here. The point is that the major issues can be identified, targets put in place, with supporting legislation and joint policies, to act as signposts for leadership selection, training, behaviours and strategy making. Thus, we do not lose ‘the wood for the trees’, so to speak, getting caught up in the complexity of global problems, the distortion of vested interests and the clear difficulties surrounding implementation – whether in countries of plenty attempting to satisfy voters or countries of poverty attempting to feed its people. Redistribution is one of the overarching goals of true sustainability and the responsible leader. A popular slogan is to ‘think globally, act locally’. We submit that it is human nature to seek to satisfy the interests of themselves and dependents and therefore suggest that we amend the slogan to ‘think locally, but act globally’. We are not suggesting that slogans are the answer; rather we are making the observation that self-interest is the norm and that reliance on altruism is indeed poor policy (Mendonca and Kanungo 1996; Finkelstein, Whitehead et al. 2009).

Doh and Stumpf (2005), editors of the *Handbook on responsible leadership and governance in global business*, begin with a definition of responsibility (from the American Heritage Dictionary, 2000) that includes a requirement to give account of actions and duty, autonomy, moral and rational decision making and dependability. They introduce the themes of each chapter/author, including situational leadership and the influence of organisational climate, role, subordinates and organisational structural properties, then go on to note the differences and limitations in transformational leadership, ethical leadership and the elements of “clarity of vision, strategic insight, relationship management and adaptability” (Rost, 1995 cited in Doh & Stumpf, 2005, p.6). Normative perspectives of responsible leadership include both ethics and competence, while

instrumental perspectives of ethical leadership require independent standards of performance that include both leader and stakeholder interests.

Implementation requires strong moral leadership and the development a moral culture that embeds ethical and moral behaviour as organisational norms. The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework, as a possible facet of responsible leadership, argues that firms need to take action beyond self interest to increase societal 'social goods' – however, the variety of motivation, ranging from altruism to strategic advantage is also noted (McWilliams and Siegel 2001).

Useem (2005) adds to defining the scope of responsible leadership by noting that responsible decisions are “active choices by managers and directors among plausible options that affect the fate of others, not just themselves” (p.71). Another element of responsible leadership is identified by Hitt and Ireland (2005) who defines strategic leadership as “the ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organisation”(p.19). Responsible leadership is thus based on super-ordinate strategies that cascade through all levels of leadership. The global mindset, required by responsible leadership, is suggested by Useem’s encouragement for decision makers to “think like a president [and] draw on the same criteria in the decision making that ought to be utilised by the person with ultimate authority... based on a well defined set of criteria” (p.72). Useem refers to the US Marine Corps approach to leadership, which encourages leaders to

- (1) Seek a 70% solution rather than one of 100% certainty;
- (2) Distribute decision authority among subordinates;
- (3) Define objectives and then let subordinates flesh out the details;
- (4) Tolerate mistakes if learning from them results in better decisions;
- and (5) create a culture in which cycle times are short and the tempo fast

Responsible leadership is synonymous with accountability, and acting in an appropriate manner, creating meaning through job enrichment, empowerment, intrinsic motivation and a clear vision for the future (Cameron and Caza 2005). Citing Quinn (2004) Doh and Stumpf (2005) note that “no

person is a leader all the time. Leadership [they say], is a temporary condition in which certain skills and competencies are displayed” (p.92).

Responsible leadership requires more than a legal framework. Ciulla (2005) notes the inadequacy of laws for enforcing complex moral issues and suggests that leaders need to be held accountable to moral standards because the potential consequences are that much greater. Waddock (2005) talks about the need for a ‘responsibility assurance’ system, with accepted standards, monitoring, reporting and processes. She also points to some existing voluntary attempts to establish standards and principles such as the UN’s Global Compact, the Global Sullivan Principles, the ISO series and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Corporations, the GLOBE project investigating the influence of culture and values-based leadership. Additionally, there are many institutions - such as the World Bank, the OECD, the International Governance Network and the IMF that also exercise influence on enacted leadership. Mallin (2005) recommends a ‘comply or explain’ mechanism such as that used in the Cadbury Report 1992 and notes mounting pressure from the international community on practices such as child labour, environmental issues, and bribery.

The above discussion suggests that overarching strategic goals need to be identified and agreed upon, leaders should be selected for strategic alignment for a finite time and purpose, and broad mechanisms need to be put in place to measure outcomes and encourage behaviours that go beyond mere compliance. However, there remains the difficulty in transmitting this strategic approach through all levels of leadership and management. Senge (1997) argued that

Almost everyone agrees that the command-and-control corporate model will not carry us into the twenty-first century. In a world of increasing interdependence and rapid change, it is no longer possible to figure it out from the top. Nor, as today’s CEOs keep discovering, is it possible to *command* people to make the profound systemic changes needed to transform industrial-age institutions for the next business era. (p.30)

Senge suggests that, in the knowledge era, “we will finally have to surrender the myth of leaders as isolated heroes commanding their organisations from on high” (p.32). Senge recommends building a ‘community of leaders’ distributing leadership down through the hierarchy to line management, with senior management mentoring them as ‘thinking partners’ and modelling behaviours that foster cultural change for learning and mutual reliance. This leads to our suggestion that ‘distributed leadership’ models may provide a useful pathway to enacting responsible leadership.

Distributed leadership

Examining models of distributed leadership may provide lessons in developing a pathway to responsible leadership. Thus far, this paper has discussed a broad definition of sustainability and suggested that responsible leadership stems from leader selection that aligns leader qualities, skills and behaviours with overarching strategic objectives. Throughout history ‘heroic’ leaders have appeared and many of us will have volumes on our bookshelves of the top 100 (500 etc.) great leaders and their biographies. However, it is evident that reliance on the heroic leader, whatever their motivation, is as fraught with risk as are appeals to altruism. If, as alleged, people will tend to pursue their own vested interests over some amorphous ‘global good’, responsible leadership must have a mechanism, or pathway, to promote ownership of the overarching strategic goals that does not rely on a heroic skill set or an unwilling population but, rather, shares both power and accountability and enables the emergence and identification of leaders appropriate to the need. This section examines elements of distributed leadership, suggesting that this emerging body of theory may provide a useful pathway for cascading global strategies, goals and objectives through succeeding levels of leadership, consistent with the general thesis of leadership suitability in context and shared accountability.

The study of leaders is as old as recorded history. Theories of leadership have emerged as a consequence of trying to identify and understand the elements and attributes that contribute to or detract from the attempts of people to influence others to perform particular activity(s) in given situations, and use theory for prediction of leader performance. Workplace

responses to global change have included the move to more transient, contractually-based forms of leader appointments (Beugelsdijk 2008; Ritterbush 2009), participative work practices (Walton 1985; Lawler 1992), flatter structures and self-managed teams (Avolio, Walumbwa et al. 2009), learning organisations (Senge 1990; Sadler 2001), integration of employee cognition and action (Graetz 2000; Gronn 2002), encouraging distributed cognition for creativity and problem solving (Hartley 2009), and utilising new technologies (Gilley, McMillan et al. 2009).

Leader research has traditionally focused on the individual but there has been an increasing demand to broaden research to include followers, context, culture, communication, strategy and global perspectives (Avolio, Walumbwa et al. 2009). Against this backdrop, distributed leadership has appeared, largely in the educational context, as a contending theory for shared leadership in action. The definition of distributed leadership is by no means settled and considerable work remains to develop conceptual clarity and test the domain empirically (Spillane 2006; Harris 2007). Bennett and Wise (2003) suggest that distributed leadership has three distinctive elements: leadership as “an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals; openness of the boundaries of leadership and; varieties of expertise ... distributed across the many, not the few” (p.7). According to Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001), distributed leadership involves distributed cognition and action, leadership being co-enacted or ‘stretched over’ the actors, artefacts, situation and actions. Spillane (2006) elaborates on this theme, suggesting that distributed leadership should be considered as a ‘lens’ or “framework for thinking about and analysing leadership” (pp.9-10). Spillane acknowledges elements of shared decision making and power evident in earlier theories, and suggests that distributed leadership is more aligned with co-leadership while Gronn (2002) suggests that it is the dispersed, aggregated nature of distributed leadership that differentiates it from individually-centred leadership.

Scribner, Sawyer, Watson and Myers (2007) say that three constructs emerge around collaborative interaction, central to distributed leadership: purpose, autonomy and patterns of discourse. Interdependencies, they say are “pooled, sequential, or reciprocal... [and] decisions emerge from

collaborative dialogues between individuals, engaged in mutually dependent activities” (p.70). While distributed leadership advocates loosening the boundaries of leadership this does not require the abdication of leadership or elimination of hierarchies. Indeed, an absence of formal authority is likely to result in divisive power struggles (Barry 1991; Woods 2004). Furthermore, there are wide differences in knowledge, power, goals and constraints across hierarchical levels and roles in an organisation that require executive decision making (Locke and Schweiger 1979; Yukl 2008; Gilley, McMillan et al. 2009). A distributed approach recognises that skills and abilities occur in differing degrees across all levels of the organisation. Facilitating distributed leadership involves formal leaders and managers delegating and supporting leadership behaviours by the people with the requisite skills for the time and situation. This approach implies that formal leaders must have and develop leadership meta-skills to manage and utilise emergent and skill-based leadership activities and provide opportunities to develop individuals and groups to accept accountability and be responsive to emergent problems (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Ancona, Malone et al. 2007).

Meta-skills for the responsible leader, using the distributed leadership lens, include strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, qualitative and quantitative measurement skills, effective communication, working with managers for ‘sense making’ and contextualising ideas and actions, integrating and coordinating ideas and actions, encouraging collaboration, using reward systems that encourage team activity - balanced with individual incentives, adopting a systems approach and organisational learning to maximise and diffuse knowledge, and maintaining an action orientation that encourages emergent leadership and shared cognition (Lawler, Mohrman et al. 1995; Sadler 2001; Day, Day et al. 2004; Ancona, Malone et al. 2007).

Current models of distributed leadership tend to be skill based and reactive to increasing workload and knowledge demands placed on individuals. Further, current models lack accountability and alignment to overarching strategy. This does not negate the value of distributed leadership, or the principles espoused, but it does emphasise the need for super-ordinate strategy and supporting mechanisms to cascade strategy and manage leadership in a planned way. Systems, communication, collaboration and

coordination, and the development of responsive culture are all necessary structural enablers. Clarity of vision, goal alignment, integrated systems and feedback are also crucial elements of responsible leadership through distributed leadership pathways.

Conclusion

This paper began by arguing that responsible leadership is the endpoint of a planned strategic process that seeks to identify and implement global-oriented strategies and goals. Limitations of the sustainability paradigm were discussed and governance issues supporting responsible leadership touched upon. The intentions of this paper were to argue for leader selection based on alignment to evolving global strategy, highlight the limitations of both a sustainability approach and reliance on individual leaders, and to suggest that distributed leadership models may be useful in developing a 'pathway' to enact responsible leadership through a planned strategic approach that cascades overarching strategic goals, principles, and accountability.

Distributed leadership is distinguished from traditional leadership theory in not being individually-based but rather concertive, action-oriented and shared. Spillane's (2006) suggestion that distributed leadership is a 'lens' for examining existing leadership is, perhaps, an understatement. Rather, it is an approach or 'pathway' to enact responsible leadership. Authority and higher-level direction is not abdicated and there is a clear recognition that interests, views, accountabilities and abilities will vary widely in society and organisational hierarchies. Elements of the meta-skills attached to the distributed leadership approach can be found in many traditional leadership theories but an explicit adoption of the distributed leadership approach, as a pathway, mandates the cascading of strategic goals, values and principles and leadership activities that facilitate their implementation. Thus, elements of risk taking, accountability, communication, goal setting and the like will form a central core to enacting responsible leadership and distributed leadership the pathway.

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