

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF PARADOX



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CHAPTER ONE

THE PARADOXES OF LEADERSHIP

Of course, life would be easier if leadership was just a list of simple rules, but paradoxes are inherent in the trade.

—*Former General Electric chairman Jack Welch*¹

General Douglas MacArthur is described by his biographer as a great thundering paradox of a man, “noble and ignoble, inspiring and outrageous, arrogant and shy, the best of men and the worst of men. . . . For each of MacArthur’s strengths, there was a corresponding MacArthur weakness.”²

“My life, my work, my position, everything I’ve done, seems intertwined with a suspiciously large number of paradoxes,” writes Vaclav Havel, the writer and intellectual who became Czechoslovakia’s president in 1989 after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Havel says that conflict, tensions, and misunderstandings upset him. Yet both his writings and his life as a political activist were full of conflict, tension, and controversy. He writes, “I’m very unsure of myself, almost a neurotic. I tend to panic easily . . . I’m plagued by self-doubts . . . yet I appear to many as someone who is sure of himself, with an enviable equanimity.” Havel liked people and bringing people together, yet was happiest when he was alone and could escape into solitary introspection as a rabble-rousing Don Quixote. “For many people I’m a constant source of hope and yet I’m always succumbing to . . . uncertainties.”³

Being a leader is a complex fate. Although contradictions and clashing expectations are part of life, they are especially present in the exercise of leadership. Leaders with great strengths often have great weaknesses as well. And what may be a leader’s strength in one area, or at one time, can prove a weakness later

on. Or as in the case of Winston Churchill, vice versa. A quality that may be a strength in one context may be a weakness in another. A leader's life is usually, as the MacArthur and Havel examples attest, a collage of conflicting expectations, dilemmas, and necessities.

We both admire and fear power. We admire and fear leaders. Likewise, we yearn for self-confident, tough-minded heroic leadership yet are also inherently suspicious of it. We at times desire decisive hierarchical leaders yet later wish to be left alone. We want leaders who are like us yet better than us. We yearn for leaders to serve the common good yet simultaneously serve particular interests. We lament the lack of leadership, yet we are harsh critics of the leaders we get. We want leaders to tell us the truth yet often get upset with them when they do. We want effective political leadership yet wish we could have it without politicians. We value leaders who have humility and compassion yet also know that sometimes it is the demanding perfectionist, control freak with narcissistic personality disorders, like Apple's Steve Jobs, who produce valuable breakthroughs. Somehow leaders like Havel, MacArthur, and Jobs learned to live with, if not master, the paradoxes confronting them.

We ask leaders to resist being overly wed to the status quo, tradition, or convention, yet we want them to possess a sense of history and a sensitivity to human experience. We are impressed with leaders who display fearless resolve, yet we also respect those who are self-effacing, acknowledge their fallibility, and learn from mistakes.

Leaders of genius and creativity have been vital in guiding us toward liberty, economic progress, peace, and social justice. Yet if leaders have often been a source of freedom and liberation, they have almost as often been responsible for war, horrible repressions, and crimes against humanity.

Leaders learn to live and cope with contradictions. Effective leaders learn to exploit contrary and divergent forces. They become savvy synthesizers of disparate information, integrative thinkers who can anticipate and read changing contexts. In Joseph Nye's useful phrase, they develop their contextual intelligence. Leadership commonly requires successive displays of contrasting characteristics. Thus leaders learn to live with ambiguous demands, shifting expectations, and sometimes fickle followers.

The effective leader in business, government, and elsewhere, much like a first-rate conductor, knows when to bring in the various sections, when to increase and diminish the volume, and how to balance opposing groups to achieve satisfying results.

Leaders are constantly buffeted by competing demands, constituencies, and policies, and must often strike a balance in order to be effective. Compromise and patience may be required in one situation, yet too much compromise or patience in other situations may be fatal.

Certain clashing expectations or contradictions are sometimes resolved by proper timing. Others have to be juggled or balanced. Effective leaders manage their time wisely while trying as well to appreciate and balance the endless stream of conflicting demands. They redefine their roles, recast strategies, reposition budgets, reorganize staff, and reorient their organizations—constantly.

This chapter explores the contradictions, paradoxes, clashing expectations, and competing demands leaders live with.

There are few fixed rules regarding leadership. It is mostly a moving target. That is why the study of leadership is more art than science.

Leadership, like life, is too complex for simplistic answers. Leadership and life are complex, contradictory, paradoxical. That is why life—and leadership—are about balance and flexibility, not absolutes and rigidity. Good leaders and healthy individuals seek a balance, deal with competing demands, are flexible.

Leadership Contradictions and Paradoxes

- We want decent, just, compassionate, and moral leaders, yet at times we admire and need tough, assertive, cunning, manipulative, and even intimidating leaders.
- Effective leadership involves self-confidence, the audacity of hope, and sometimes even a fearless optimism. However, humility, self-doubt, and self-control are also essential.
- Leaders must be representative—yet not too representative; they need to consult and engage followers, and they need to respond to them. Yet they also must educate, motivate, and unlock the best in everyone.
- Leaders must be visionaries guided by ideas, ideals, and principles, yet we also want pragmatic realists guided by logic, evidence, and level-headed rational analysis.
- Leaders invent and reinvent themselves. Their leadership usually is intentional, not accidental. Yet people also want their leaders to be open, relaxed, “authentic,” sincere, spontaneous, and to somehow emerge from within rather than be imposed upon a group.
- Leadership often calls for intensity, enthusiasm, passion, dramatization, and self-promotion—yet too much highly personalized volcanic energy can paralyze an organization. Too much of a “cult of personality” can create dependency or other organizational dysfunctions.
- Leaders need to unify their organizations or communities through effective negotiation and alliance building, yet leaders also have to stir things

up and jolt their organizations out of complacency. In short, we ask them to be unifiers *and* dividers.

- Leaders are supposed to lead, not follow the polls, yet they are often followers as much as they are leaders. One of the grand paradoxes of leadership is that leaders often follow, and followers often point the way or lead more than is appreciated. Change often comes from the bottom up rather than from the top down. And it often comes from the young rather than from establishment elites.
- Although we may reject the General George Patton or the Godfather model of leadership for most of our organizations most of the time, we still want to believe leaders make a significant difference—yet idealistic and romantic theories exaggerate the impact of leaders. Most of the time, “leaders” are agents of their organizations or are at least shaped by them more than they are agents of change.

Moral versus Manipulative

Most people want leaders to be decent, just, and “proper” in their personal conduct. Others, more focused on results, look for hard-driving personalities and insist that leaders be opportunistic, realistic, and masters of trading, accommodation, and guile.

We want leaders to be ferocious or compassionate, mean-spirited or sensitive, ruthless or cooperative, depending on what we want done, depending on the situation, depending on how much time is available, and to some extent, depending on the agreed-upon “successful” role models of the recent past.

No magic formula exists. Leaders need to be sensitive to the varying expectations of their followers and aware, too, of the shifting nature of their followers’ dispositions.

However much we admire transparency, vulnerability, and an emphasis on teamwork, many of our most effective business and societal leaders have been vain, crafty, and deceitful. Thus Franklin D. Roosevelt may have devoted himself to advancing the ends of social justice and peace, but his biographers agree he was often duplicitous, vain, manipulative, and had a passion for secrecy.

Change is scary and organizations sometimes need scary, in-your-face leaders to steer them through tough times. “Great intimidators may create disharmony,” writes Stanford University professor Roderick Kramer, “but they also can create value.” He points to Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Martha Stewart, and Michael Eisner as abrasive, forceful, and sometimes intimidating bosses.⁴

Management writers such as Jim Collins, Max De Pree, and Robert Greenleaf have famously argued that the best chief executives are humble, self-effacing,

resolute, yet not flamboyant egotists. They find many examples to back up their contention.⁵ But others contend that the corporate and political worlds sometimes need flamboyant visionaries and narcissists. “Think of the people who have shaped the modern business landscape, and ‘faceless’ and ‘humble’ are not the first words that come to mind,” writes a columnist for *The Economist*.⁶

Henry Ford was as close as you get to being deranged without losing your liberty. John Patterson, the founder of National Cash Register and one of the greatest businessmen of the gilded age, once notified an employee that he was being sacked by setting fire to his desk. Thomas Watson . . . the founder of IBM, turned his company into a cult and himself into the object of collective worship. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are both tightly wound empire-builders. Jack Welch and Lou Gerstner are anything but self-effacing. These are people who have created the future, rather than merely managing change, through the force of their personalities and the strength of their visions.⁷

Americans can become supercritical of would-be leaders who are viewed as soft, wimpy, or afraid to make unpopular decisions. This is as true in politics as it is in business. Among others, Adlai Stevenson, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, Michael Dukakis, John Kerry, and Barack Obama were faulted at times for indecision, timidity, or failure to be pragmatists. Journalists merely said they did not know how to play “hardball.”⁸ And yet, the opposite can also lead to poor performance, as the apparent certainty of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney sometimes demonstrated.

A leader “must know when to dissemble, when to be frank. He must pose as a servant of the public in order to become its master,” wrote Charles de Gaulle in *The Edge of the Sword*.⁹ He also said leaders had to have a strong dose of egotism, pride, and hardness. Former president Richard Nixon goes even further in one of his many memoirs: “Guile, vanity, dissembling—in other circumstances these might be unattractive habits, but to the leader they can be essential.”¹⁰

We do not openly admire cunning as a quality, and we know that too much of it can destroy a dedicated leader. Yet as political scientist Clinton Rossiter noted, “a president cannot get the best out of the dozens of able figures around him or keep them under his command unless he is a master in the delicate art of manipulating men.”¹¹

Leaders have to be uncommonly active, attentive listeners. They must “squint” with their ears. But they can’t listen forever. Eventually they must act, decide, and make judgments. People such as Hamlet waited too long to act. Others like King Lear, Othello, or Sophocles’ King Creon listened poorly, if at all, and acted in foolish haste.

Ambition is essential if a leader is to make a difference. To gain and retain power one must have a love of power, and this love of power can be incompatible

with moral goodness. In fact, ambition is more often linked to qualities of pride, narcissism, duplicity, and cruelty and often raises all the worst fears associated with questionable ends justifying unacceptable means.

The intentional use of coercion, force, and even killing may, under certain circumstances, be morally justified. Leaders can't always combat evil with goodness. Some just causes, such as just wars, require unjust means. The moral dilemma sometimes becomes a choice between two competing evils.

Leaders who are transformational can also be impatient and can display deep-seated hostility toward the status quo. They can be driven and angry, with a compulsive darker side that can make them impossible and dangerous personalities.

Leaders invariably combine toughness and softness. "Where results must be achieved quickly he must, on occasion, be ruthless if it is possible to be ruthless without injuring the confidence of his employees or the claimants to his service."¹²

Yet the successful leader must also be fair. "If he becomes arbitrary, capricious, and dictatorial, he may become feared but he will also lose his qualifications for leadership. Morale has never yet flourished in an organization based largely upon fear," writes management writer Marshall Dimock. "Sooner or later the members of such an institution find it possible to secure their revenge."¹³

A leader takes care not to become too self-absorbed. Self-preoccupation becomes one's own prison.

Leadership, divorced from worthy purposes, is merely manipulation of deception and, in the extreme, the wielding of repressive and tyrannical power.

Still a paradox remains. "Power, or organized energy, may be a man-killing explosive or a life-saving drug," writes Saul Alinsky. "The power of a gun may be used to enforce slavery, or to achieve freedom."¹⁴ And so it is with leadership. Leaders must respect the preciousness of human life. Elements of calculation, abrasiveness, manipulation, and egoism are endemic in positions of authority. But a leader must also be able to consider people in the wholeness of their lives, not just for getting a job done or as a means for enhancing a bottom line.

Leaders who are hell-bent on success rarely ponder whether the ends justify the means. Consequently, their means often undermine their ends.

Thus leaders have to choose between democratic and autocratic styles, and how open or secretive, how honest or cunning, they should be in a particular situation. Much depends on their community's accepted values. Yet even within a culture or communities, there are marked variations in how leaders wrestle with this dilemma.

Few things, Abraham Lincoln said, are wholly good or wholly evil. Most choices are an inseparable mix of the two. Judgment about balance between good and evil is continually demanded. Effective leaders are balanced individuals; they are self-aware and self-assured yet willing to learn from their mistakes.

They weigh conflicting good and evil among alternative courses, and strike a balance that weighs on the side of the good.

Do leaders occupy a different moral universe than the rest of us? One of the paradoxes of leadership is that the public demands leaders be of high moral quality yet at times do things that are morally reprehensible. On one level, they must behave in ways that we as individuals do not condone. Because of the responsibilities that weigh on leaders, they occupy a different moral world than ordinary citizens. The responsibilities on a leader's shoulders grant more latitude than mere citizens possess.

As individuals, we choose the moral or religious guidelines by which we live our lives. This choice is ours and we accept the consequences. And as we are directly responsible only to ourselves and our families, the fallout of moral and religious choices is limited. The leader, on the other hand, does not have the luxury of living only for oneself and is responsible for and to the larger community. The leader may or may not share our own religious and moral convictions, but that is of little consequence. Leaders cannot impose their own religious views on the society as a whole, nor can they abandon their greater responsibility, which is to serve and protect the entire community.

The ethics of leadership are, and must be, *situational* and *positional*. They are contingent on the circumstances confronting the legitimate leader of the community in an uncertain, complex, and sometimes violent world. As Machiavelli reminds us, a leader "must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him . . . and not deviate from right conduct, but be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary."¹⁵ And although all religions have universal ethical principles or "oughts," such as thou shalt not kill or lying is wrong, these rules are not absolutes. After all, if it is wrong to kill, then all wars are wrong, all death penalties are wrong. So we make exceptions. The mark of a sophisticated mind is the ability to think in degrees, to form a hierarchy of values. Such a mind asks when and under what circumstance is one justified in breaking with the moral norms of society?

Machiavelli also reminds a would-be prince that to accomplish great things, he may on occasion have to act in rough or even evil ways. But Machiavelli's insight is not a green light for a leader to behave badly. The evil of which he speaks must be entered into only as the situation demands. He did not advise the prince to be evil, only that there would be times and circumstances when to either protect his power or the state, he must be ready to use evil for strategic ends. Yet the prince would be prepared to act immorally only "when this becomes necessary." *When this becomes necessary*. Of course, we are all selfish judges of our own cases; so on this Machiavelli opens himself up to criticism, but his general principle has

merit. When dealing with evil or dangerous people, only a fool would take the moral high ground when it would undermine his interests.

The goal, as Terry L. Price writes in *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership*, is that “leaders must differentiate between those requirements that apply to them and those with respect to which a deviation would be justified. . . . The main challenge in leadership ethics is to clarify and to give precision to the justificatory force of leadership.” Price adds that “leaders are excepted from moral requirements only on the condition that there are some reasons or set of reasons that legitimates the exceptions.” Perhaps the most important feature of this model environment is “the expectation that leaders make explicit appeal to the reasons that legitimate deviations from moral requirements by which the rest of us are bound.”¹⁶

Of course, that does not mean leaders get a free ride to be or do anything they wish. The leader’s freedom to act is not a license to act in any way he desires. Leaders are confined by moral codes, just not the moral codes that apply to the rest of us. Leaders have greater freedom to act, yet this freedom is not limitless. Ironically, there are few restrictions placed upon most leaders. Most restrictions are self-imposed.

If leaders must act in ways that are morally questionable, they must fully justify those acts. Abraham Lincoln, during the Civil War, acted in ways that would, in normal times, have led to his impeachment. But Lincoln, facing the crisis of civil war, appealed to the Congress and public that, based on the crisis, the *doctrine of necessity* governed his behavior. This doctrine forgives many but not all sins. Lincoln believed he had pursued all other avenues, exhausted all other options, and had no other choice but to act as he did. In Lincoln’s own words, “As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.” And he did so publicly and invited the Congress to legitimize his acts.

It is praiseworthy to be a good person. And we esteem leaders who possess the qualities we think are admirable. But the chief goal of a national leader is to serve the needs and interests of the larger commonwealth, which means that there may be times when leaders cannot observe the demands of goodness that bind private individuals. But the burden of proof is exceptionally high, and when leaders choose to transgress a moral norm, they must be on the steadiest of grounds. Thus, they need to answer: Is this truly a case of necessity? Has one exhausted all the normal options? Do these acts promote the rights, security, and welfare of the people-at-large, or are they merely a case of despotism or empire building? And, finally, were these decisions or actions effective?

Although not everyone believes there should be a “moral exceptionalism” for leaders, in practice that is precisely what occurs.¹⁷ Better to face up to and deal constructively with the moral dilemma than bury one’s head in the sand with moral considerations. One does not have to have a leader-centric view to give the leader some latitude here. As Machiavelli noted, and Lincoln practiced, *necessity*

can be a powerful, if unsatisfying moral imperative. Leaders on occasion have “dirty hands” because—for us—they sometimes engage in a dirty (as well as at other times ennobling) business.¹⁸

We’ll return to this paradox again in Chapter 11. For now we would only note that leaders such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln taught us productive methods of dealing with or synthesizing this particular paradox.

Self-Confidence versus Humility

A leader needs contagious confidence, drive, and focus. Humility—the ability to view and evaluate oneself honestly and without defensiveness—is admirable, yet excessive humility paralyzes. “Most of the significant advances in the world have been made by people with at least a touch of irrational confidence in themselves.”¹⁹

Leaders must believe in themselves. Israeli general Moshe Dayan talked of this calculated self-confidence in battle situations: “When I go into battle, I am 100 percent sure I will win and come out safely. I believe, with my luck and skill, that I’ll manage between the bullets and they will not get hold of me. You have to feel this way or you’ll never come out of it.”²⁰ Dayan added, “You can show no doubt—only black and white. Except at night, when you are alone, you can look at it and wonder if maybe you were wrong. But you never show it.”²¹

Leaders face all the complexities of the situation, yet, in the end, they must act. Shakespeare’s *Henry V* provided this gamble-it-all, whatever-the-odds call to arms in his famed pre-Agincourt battle talk to his troops. Winston Churchill in the midst of World War II displayed a similar quality.

“Any self-doubts the leader may have, especially in the battlefield, must be concealed at all costs,” writes military historian John Keegan. “The leader of men in warfare can show himself to his followers only through a mask, a mask that he must make for himself. But a mask made in such form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need.”²²

The politician who does not with every fiber of his body want to be a leader, says management guru Peter Drucker, is not likely to be effective or remembered. “To be more than a ‘journeyman’ requires a man who is conceited enough to believe that the world—or at least the nation—really needs him and depends on his getting into power.”²³

But untempered confidence is dangerous. Hitler oozed it. So did Herman Melville’s mad Captain Ahab. Yet both had vision, purpose, and drive.

The critical test is whether a large ego is subject to reasonable self-control. Self-discipline is key. An undisciplined large ego that constantly needs to be fed and isn’t placed in disciplined service of worthy ends is an ego that doubtless corrupts the individual.²⁴

Having a *strong ego* can be usefully distinguished from having a *big ego*. A person with a strong ego has plenty of drive and ambition yet is open and flexible and has a connective sense of relationships. A *strong ego* pays attention to others and context. A *big ego* craves flattery and attention. A big ego is often rigid and controlling. A big ego quickly loses rather than earns our respect.²⁵

Leaders believe in *themselves* yet cannot afford to discredit the ideas, counsel, or criticism of others. Leaders who embrace thoughtful dissent in their organizations are likely to encourage better organizational decision making. Good leaders acknowledge criticism without retaliating against critics. Hitler and Saddam Hussein eliminated their critics. Ahab ignored his.

Sophocles' King Creon, in the play *Antigone*, listened almost entirely to himself and this proved fatal. His son chided him, famously saying, "let not your first thought be your only thought. Think if there cannot be some other way. Surely, to think your own the only wisdom, and yours the only word, the only will, betrays a shallow spirit, an empty heart. It is no weakness," says Haemon to King Creon, "for the wise man to learn when he is wrong, know when to yield." So, "father, pause, and put aside your anger. I think for what my young opinion's worth, that good as it is to have infallible wisdom, since this is rarely found, the next best thing is to be willing to listen to wise advice."²⁶

But Creon dismisses his son's advice, saying, "Indeed, am I to take lessons at my time of life from a fellow of his age?" He ignores everyone else as well, until, of course, it is too late. His self-centeredness and arrogance, just as is the case with Shakespeare's Lear, invite the tragedy.

The moral is, of course, that we are all a little like Creon, we are all a little like Douglas MacArthur or any hardheaded, determined individual. A fine line separates self-confidence from pigheaded pride, boldness from recklessness.

Leaders balance the need to be self-assured and the need to keep learning. Timing and balance are crucial. They need to have the will to act and the humility to listen. Morgan McCall and colleagues write that "we are a contradictory, paradoxical, and miscellaneous jumble of vices and virtues. And this is why balance is so basic. Every strength can also turn out to be a weakness, and great strengths or weaknesses can grow unjustifiably overblown."²⁷ The challenge is how to blend competing impulses and wisely combine them.

How can we safeguard against the mistake-prone, overly confident, impulsive big-ego types? Prizewinning psychologist Daniel Kahneman says the well-functioning organization can serve as an appropriate check and balance. "Organizations are better than individuals when it comes to avoiding errors, because they naturally think more deeply and have the power to impose orderly procedures."²⁸ Yes, organizations slow things down, but they can also upgrade the quality of the decision-making processes that produce good judgment.

Representative Yet Not Too Representative

We yearn for leaders with vision or dreams of what might be, people who have lofty standards and will relentlessly pursue success and excellence. This is the perennial search for the heroic. When we witness these visionaries we say they are great because they are original and remind us of no one else. On the other hand, we also yearn for representative leaders—those who are a lot like us. Heroic or charismatic leaders, by nature, are often aloof, distant, and detached. They conceal their real selves from their followers.

Hence the paradox: we want great leaders but also leaders who are not too different from us. A president must have "common opinions" but it is equally imperative that he be an "uncommon man," writes Harold Laski in discussing the ideal qualities for an American president. "The public must see themselves in him, but they must at the same time be confident that he is something bigger than themselves."²⁹

Then, too, we yearn for flawless leaders; yet a dose of vulnerability can often add to their accessibility, likeability, and even charm.

On many issues, however, people must wait for their so-called leaders to catch up. On other issues, associates or constituents need to be lifted out of their old routines and need galvanizing leaders to bring the best out of everyone. In the end, the exercise of leadership is the act of balancing ideals and realities, the views of the people and the realities of what can be and what should be done. Again, it is a matter of balance and timing. A friend of ours, who served his state as an effective governor, once noted in yet another variation of this paradox: "The people always want you to tell them the truth yet they get madder than hell at you when you do."

"I do not believe that any man can lead who does not act, whether it be consciously or unconsciously, under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads," said Woodrow Wilson. This is, he added, "a sympathy which is insight—an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect."³⁰

The question, of course, is how sympathetic can one be. Writers such as Walter Lippmann and Hans J. Morgenthau counsel that leadership or "statesmanship" consists of giving the people not what they may want at a given moment but rather what they will learn to respect later on. *Politicians* accept public opinion, Lippmann held, whereas *leaders* reeducate their public and place opinion in larger contexts. Lippmann warned about being too representative: "The chief element in the art of statesmanship under modern conditions is the ability to elucidate the confused and clamorous interests which converge upon the seat of government. It is an ability to penetrate from the naïve self-interest of each group to its permanent and real interest." Lippmann added, "It is a difficult art that requires great courage, deep sympathy, and a vast amount of information. That is why it is so rare."³¹

Morgenthau, writing at least a generation later, agrees. The will to lead, he writes, can be paralyzed by an unfounded fear of and a “misplaced deference to public opinion. Presidents must reverse the established pattern of subservience to public opinion and become its molders, for this subservience does nothing but enfeeble the will to govern.”³² Machiavelli, of course, had put it even more strongly.

Authentic leadership, however, is always a collective process, an inevitable engagement, a meshing of the views of the leader as well as the led. It emerges, says James MacGregor Burns, from the clash and the congruence of motives and goals of both followers and leaders. It requires that leaders neither slavishly adapt their own motives and goals to those of their followers, nor the reverse. Still, the essence of the art of leadership is the reality that people can be, and often want to be, motivated and lifted into their better selves.³³

Visionary or Realistic?

Vision is incredibly important. Yet so is execution and getting things accomplished, often even small things. “Yes, we need vision,” goes the old lament, “but we also need somebody to tell us what to do.” So the best vision is often supervision.

Idealism and realism are at war with one another in every community. Effective leaders blend them in ways that are appropriate to the times, circumstances, and community values. Leaders in the middle must integrate, coordinate, harmonize, and bring extremes into some form of a coherent whole. Only then will leaders become architects of shared value and community. But leaders in the middle continually risk being torpedoed by rival forces.

The oft-cited biblical proverb warns, “where there is no vision, the people perish.” Victor Hugo added that “there is nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come.” A primary task of a leader is to discern the compelling needs of the time and then develop a vision to address both needs and possibilities. Leaders often relate to followers through stories (Lincoln) or parables (Jesus) or example (Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela). They paint word pictures or offer hopeful narratives that articulate what is often unspoken within the people.

An effective vision allows us to see where we want to go, and when the circumstances are right, to move in that direction. Vision is purpose exposed and made clear.

A vision guides action, is about the future, draws people to its premise and logic, is about empowerment, defines meaning, and is goal oriented. The best vision reminds us who we are, is simultaneously backward looking and aspirational; it accentuates what we hope to achieve.

Visions rarely spring full blown from the mind of a leader. Enabling and empowering visions emerge instead from mutually shared interests, values, and aspirations; flow from the past; and reflect the new requirements of the present and future.

A solid vision is a dream of a more desirable future, a dream realistic enough to appear attainable, compelling enough to inspire, and attractive enough to gain consent and commitment. It is mostly about encouraging hope: this is what tomorrow can be, this is how we can get there, this is what it will take, this is how you can play a significant role in making it happen, and this will be how we can “change history.” Effective visions grab our attention, stir our imagination, and call on us to become the very best we can become.

Leadership requires radiating confidence, yet grounding in reality. “Become passionately dedicated to ‘visions’ and fanatically committed to carrying them out—but be flexible, responsive, and able to change direction quickly,” writes Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth M. Kanter.³⁴ A leader must be a realist and a pragmatist yet also a creative dreamer. An equilibrium is needed, reconciling dreams and reality, intuition and logic.

“We need leaders of inspired idealism,” said Theodore Roosevelt, “leaders to whom are granted great visions, who dream greatly and strive to make their dreams come true; who can kindle the people with the fire from their own burning souls.”³⁵ We admire leaders who refuse to compromise their values; yet TR, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and indeed almost all of our presidents were accomplished compromisers.

We occasionally look to idealists and prophets because we know major breakthroughs often come from “conviction leaders” rather than conventional leaders. This is true, in part, because majority opinion often stifles new approaches. As every politician knows, “If you oppose your constituents too directly on an issue too close to their hearts, you are not going to get elected,” or reelected.³⁶

Leadership, however, does not always wear the harness of compromise. Leaders sometimes are motivated by the purest of ideals. Such reformers or agitators don’t bow to the conventions of their times but challenge them. These reformers “wear no armor, they stride no chargers; they only speak their thoughts. . . . But the attacks they sustain are more cruel than the collisions of arms,” writes Woodrow Wilson. “Friends desert and despise them. They stand alone, and oftentimes are made bitter by their isolation. They are doing nothing less than defying public opinion.” Wilson captures the difficulty faced by idealistic reformers:

These men who stood alone at the inception of the movement and whose voices then seemed as it were the voices of men crying in the wilderness, have in reality been simply the more sensitive organs of society—the parts first awakened to consciousness of a situation. With the start and irritation of a rude and sudden

summons from sleep, society at first resents the disturbance of its restful unconsciousness, and for a moment racks itself with hasty passion. But, once completely aroused, it will sanely meet the necessities of conduct revealed by the hour of its awakening.³⁷

Arousing, agitational consciousness-raising leadership is often indispensable for social progress. Thomas Paine, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Susan B. Anthony played such roles in America.

We expect leaders to provide us with bold, creative, and forceful initiatives, yet society resists radical change. We commonly embrace “new” initiatives only after they have achieved wide consensus. In a sense, we elect leaders to “make things better,” then fight them nearly every step of the way.

Elected officials regularly fear taking a controversial stand too early on important issues. Thus the old saw: “I’m a person of fixed and unbending principles—but my first fixed and unbending principle is to be flexible at all times.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt knew voters liked candidates with firm opinions, yet he also knew that to get elected and to govern he needed to keep his options open. He once explained to an adviser that although he could educate voters about the merits of his proposals after he became president, as a candidate he had to accept people’s prejudices and do what he could to work with them and “turn them to good.”³⁸

FDR later proclaimed the presidency is preeminently a place for moral leadership, but, as noted, he was as pragmatic and opportunistic as most of the occupants of his position. Roosevelt knew political leadership in America required sometimes taking bold stands and yet at other times remaining vague or uncommitted. Timing shapes success or failure.

We want leaders to inspire creativity and organizational efficiency. Creativity, however, involves taking risks. Creative initiatives often fail and can be disruptive. Creative organizations are willing to accept disruption, failure, mistakes, and instability. But how much is enough? What’s the balance?

Leaders have to decide how much instability can be tolerated. They have to know when to nurture creativity and also when to abandon a venture when this is required.

We ask leaders for visionary idealism *and* tough realism, optimism *and* logic, intuition *and* rationality, creativity *and* organizational stability. They need to balance bold dreams with accurate, reliable information and pragmatic implementation.

Business organizations constantly experience the tensions between relying on intuition and rational analysis. Creative, innovative solutions are required to solve complex problems, but corporate promotion systems often discourage innovative people from assuming leadership positions. Thus, however much we

yearn for this kind of visionary leadership, we often prevent these types from rising to the top. We suspect those who might strike off on their own and disrupt existing habits and ideas.

Excessive reliance on visionaries can be fatal to any organization. Melville’s Captain Ahab had plenty of passion and vision. He took a bold stand—committing his crew and his ship to a mighty mission: get Moby Dick. Logic and reason were not common on his ship. John Brown of Harpers Ferry fame had plenty of vision too. Vision, unchecked by clearheaded rational evaluation, proved costly for Ahab and Brown and their associates.

Cold Calculation versus Spontaneity

Leadership is seldom a random act. Much of what leaders do is intentional.

Peter Drucker says that in all his years of advising businesses he never came across a “natural” executive, that is, an executive who was born successful. “Leaders invent themselves,” says Warren Bennis. “Leaders have nothing but themselves to work with.”³⁹

In effect leaders have to be actors or actresses who become the makers and directors of their own lives. They reject randomness. They embrace destiny. They redefine luck as, just as the cliché has it, when preparation and learning meet opportunity.

Bennis finds leaders rise to the top because they are self-made; they have lived in their organization yet have brought creativity and original ideas to it. “I cannot stress too much the need for self-invention,” writes Bennis. “To be authentic is literally to be your own author . . . to discover your own native energies and desires, and then to find your own way of acting on them.”⁴⁰

Successful leaders understand the importance of theater and self-promotion. If they have the ideas and reform impulses but lack a stage, their ideas are unlikely to gain much attention. The two go hand in hand—self-promotion and policy substance.

France’s Charles de Gaulle held that nothing great can be achieved without great leaders, and that individuals “are great only if they are determined to be so.”⁴¹ Note the role willpower plays in Bennis, de Gaulle, and others. They are saying that leaders are necessarily promoters—promoters of self as well as ideas.

They set about learning to be effective, seizing opportunities to display their leadership. “He must outbid his rivals in self-confidence, and only after a thousand intrigues will he find himself entrusted with full power,” writes de Gaulle.⁴²

Leaders are often obsessed with making a difference. “I have always had an absolutely obsessive focus, obsessive to the point that people have wanted to cage me up at times,” says Portia Isaacson, chair and CEO of Intellisys Corporation.

She says that when she starts a project she drops everything else and intensely concentrates on it. "This absolutely obsessive focus is not necessarily a positive trait," she adds. "It drives some people away. . . . Being a compulsive workaholic, I have to be very conscious about not demanding that kind of behavior from other people. I am sensitive to the fact that some people like balance in their lives—even though I guess I don't."⁴³

Constituents, however, also want leaders who are "natural" or "organic." Authenticity is crucial for a leader's believability. Spontaneity is also needed. Calculations and plans can and often do go awry. Adaptability and flexibility are essential.

This raises our familiar question whether leaders shape events or are shaped by social forces and events. The quick answer, of course, is that organizations, culture, circumstances, and resources shape leaders more than leaders shape their environments. Social forces play an obvious part in the development and exercise of leadership. It varies, of course, depending on the organizational setting—and that is the heart of this ambiguity.

In practice, leaders shape as well as are shaped. Nelson Mandela is a good example. His people—black South Africans—yearned for political and economic rights. Mandela was a product of the large community of which he was just a singular part. But by intense discipline and personal sacrifice, Mandela earned the respect of his people by giving voice and meaning to their inchoate feelings. Was Mandela shaped by the needs and aspirations of the movement? Definitely. Did he invent and earn a role of leadership for himself? Definitely. "He is a man whose life instructs that people can assert control of their personal destiny no matter what the force of the hardships they incur and that they can by their own conduct overwhelm the odds against them."⁴⁴

Culture shapes the character of leaders, and the requirements or needs of a cultural community define the contributions of a leader. We look for leaders within ourselves, our groups, our communities and organizations. But we also look for leaders who have left the "tribe," who have gone away and gained a range of different experiences and insights. They return to our groups no longer exactly as one of us. Thus leaders in part invent themselves and in part we invent them. But it is complicated further, for leaders and their cultures are forever shaping one another as well. After his analysis of Moses as a political and religious leader, political scientist Aaron Wildavsky concludes that just as there are no great leaders for all seasons, no single concept of leadership can serve every purpose. "By conceiving of leadership as contingent on context, we are at least warned that it is futile to search for single types."⁴⁵

Just as seasons change, so too do the seasons of leadership. Some seasons require a leader with a firm hand; others, a leader who is able to collaborate. Some require representative leaders who follow our directions; others, inven-

tive leaders who show us the way. Office holders who are unable to identify the changing seasons and who cannot alter their leadership styles to the changing climate are doomed to fail.

Passion versus Reason

A leader must stir our blood *and* appeal to our reason. Enthusiasm lifts all enterprises, and yet excessive enthusiasm can destroy the integrity of an operation. Both enthusiasm and optimism can be "force multipliers"; yet both, in excess, are dysfunctional or worse.

A few years ago we encountered a gentleman who shared the following problem. He had a volunteer who was exuberant and passionate about her tasks, so much so that she was painfully disruptive. Such was her enthusiasm and energy that she caused stress and derailed rather than advanced the goals of the organization. The executive in charge could hardly fault her for lack of commitment, yet he had to calm her down or transfer her to a job where her enthusiasm could be more properly channeled.

Business and political leaders emphasize the importance of showmanship. Churchill, Gandhi, TR, de Gaulle, Mao Zedong, FDR, MacArthur, Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Havel, Obama, and many other national leaders often dramatized their initiatives with theatrical personal visits or similar symbolism. Sometimes it was an unannounced visit to their troops in battle. Sometimes it took the form of a stirring oration. In Gandhi's case it took the form of fasts or a long march to the sea. On still other occasions leadership flare manifested itself in mingling with constituents. Whatever the approach, leaders are remembered for an uncommon spark of passion for what they believed.

"A great leader must have a certain irrational quality, a stubborn refusal to face facts, infectious optimism, the ability to convince us that all is not lost even when we're afraid it is," writes Michael Korda. Confucius suggested, adds Korda, that "while the advisors of a great leader should be as cold as ice, the leader himself should have fire, a spark of divine madness."⁴⁶

Public opinion polls highlight this contradiction. When asked to describe in their own words the qualities they would like to have in national leaders, respondents give high marks to honesty and trustworthiness. They favor leaders with simple rather than imperial tastes. On the other hand, they express a strong preference for a spellbinding speaker, someone like John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan who inspires the nation. An old Greek saying holds that there are basically two types of leaders, the hedgehogs and the foxes. The hedgehog knows only one or two things but is dogged in pursuit of these goals. Foxes, on the other hand, are said to know many things and pursue multiple priorities.

Lincoln, FDR, and Reagan are archetypal hedgehogs. They were driven by single-minded devotion to specific large causes. They regularly simplified their goals to dramatize the need. They were wholesalers. Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter are likened to foxes that get caught up with so many unclear undertakings that they eventually become buried under the load.

Effective leaders learn to be both hedgehogs and foxes, wholesalers as well as retailers. They have macro agendas as well as a concern for the details. They dramatize their missions yet know that displays of passion and rhetoric need to be balanced by reflective reasoning.

Unifiers and Dividers

Leaders relish the role of serving as a uniter. President George W. Bush even campaigned on this theme. "I'll be a uniter and not a divider," he boasted in 2000. But, as with the Bush example, leaders invariably become dividers. The country did unite briefly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. And Bush tried to take some credit for this. Yet he divided the nation with his Iraq war and Social Security reform policies, among others.⁴⁷

Leadership involves unifying and pulling people together. But crises and change necessitate priority setting, decision, and often division. Leaders break deadlocks and rally support around new goals. In breaking deadlocks leaders make decisions that inevitably disappoint supporters of alternative plans, as well as adherents of the status quo. Machiavelli famously describes this well:

There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things, for the reformer has enemies in all those who would profit by the old order and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order.⁴⁸

The strength of a leader often lies in knowing how to deal with competing factions, knowing when to compromise and when to heighten or sharpen conflict in an organization. Although shared values are essential to the smooth functioning of most organizations, leaders occasionally need to stir things up.

Saul Alinsky, a legendary Chicago community organizer, like most organizers of "the have-nots," sought change. Outsiders, he believed, had to fight for change. One of his maxims for organizers was to pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it. The first law of community organizing, Alinsky said, is community disorganizing.⁴⁹ Yet even Alinsky counseled that conflict should not be allowed to go on for too long.

Effective corporate leaders know the usefulness, at least on occasion, of sweeping reorganizations and infusing a spirit of change in their organizations. They may not use the word "conflict," but they come to see the need for realigning and, in effect, disturbing the settled culture.

A major insurance company we watched closely had this type of top leadership. The president of the firm made it plain he was dissatisfied with the rigidity and lack of imagination in his company. His remedy was to shake things up: fire people, reorganize divisions, bring in new leaders from the outside, introduce new planning procedures, and require the top 2,000 managers to take a series of competency workshops including one on "Executive Leadership." He was seeking to unify the company and refocus its priorities. He had, he believed, to jolt his lumbering organization. They needed to adapt to new realities. They needed new competencies, new methodologies, and new attitudes. Conflict and a certain amount of disequilibrium were the price he was willing to pay as a means of turning his organization around.

Creativity and innovation often arise out of tension, passion, conflict, and paradox. "Paradoxical qualities within an organization have value because they force people to think outside the box, and to break away from convenient categories and patterns," writes business consultant Richard T. Pascale. "The puzzle in a paradox serves as an impulse; it energizes our minds to 'jump the rails' in search of a reconciling insight."⁵⁰ Smart leaders embrace conflict and paradox and occasionally introduce it into their organizations as a means of enhancing self-renewal. Cultivating these opportunities can help liberate an organization to see more clearly.

Leaders regularly decide how much harmony or how much tension is needed to achieve their organizations' objectives. Organizations need action and decisiveness; yet they also need harmony, shared values, community, and integration. Effective leaders understand how to use selective conflict for revitalization.

Reasonable people, as George Bernard Shaw noted, adjust to reality and cope with what they find. Unreasonable people dream dreams of a different, better world and try to adapt the world to themselves. This discontent or unreasonable-ness is often the first step in the progress of an organization or a nation-state.

Yet, innovators, "stirrer-upperers," disrupters, and conflict polarizers are threatening people. In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. This may be as the proverb states, but in the kingdom of one-eyed people, the two-eyed person is looked upon with profound suspicion. Leaders are often those two-eyed, twice-born types, who perceive things differently and who think differently. And thus they challenge the status quo, they war on complacency, they become "movers and shakers"—all of which done too fast or too much can create instability.

How do leaders transcend or at least cope with this paradox? One way is to focus on underlying *values*. If these are understood and shared, considerable

organizational or societal change can be permitted in their pursuit. Another way is to develop integrative strategies that can harness the creative energy of the disruptive catalysts without paralyzing the overall enterprise. Then there is the Steve Jobs example. Fire him. But bring him back at the appropriate time and let him be in charge. That might not work for most organizations, but it worked for Apple and, in some ways, may be a quintessential example of unleashing the power of paradox.

The Leader/Follower Paradox

We customarily think of leaders as taking bold initiatives, as preoccupied with tomorrow rather than today, and as being out in front, pulling followers along. In short, a leader's job is to lead, "not to follow the polls."⁵¹ Although this conception of leaders has some merit, in reality it is not entirely accurate.

Leaders are usually as much created by their organization as the other way around. Leaders lead as well as follow, and those who follow also often—at least in some way—lead.

Motorola's Bob Galvin said to lead well presumes the ability to follow smartly. The test of leadership, he suggests, is not to direct or command but to work with followers in such a way as they will become leaders and develop an ability to make the right decisions on their own. Under this kind of leadership it is not always clear just who is leading whom. What is important is that everyone learns to lead even as they collaborate as team members.⁵²

If one defines leadership as a process of empowering a group to adapt wisely to change and achieve its goals, then leaders must have a solid grasp of what their followers wish to achieve. Yet they must also set goals that their followers might not otherwise appreciate. In this sense leaders are listeners who anticipate the cues of those they lead. If they fail to do so their leadership is jeopardized; leaders are nothing without followers. As noted, leadership is conferred and legitimized by followers. As management scholar Chester Barnard put it, "The decision as to whether an order has authority or not lies with the persons to whom it is addressed, and does not reside in 'persons of authority' or those who issue these orders."⁵³ Followers need to be persuaded.

Most people can be led only where they want to go. Effective leadership, writes James MacGregor Burns, is a collective process. It emerges from a sensitivity or appreciation of the motives and goals of both followers and leaders. The test of leadership, says Burns, "is the realization of intended, real change that meets people's enduring needs." Thus a key function of leadership is "to engage followers, not merely to activate them, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise, and in the process to make better citizens of both leaders and followers."⁵⁴

Courageous followers help keep a leader honest and out of trouble—that is, if leaders listen. In a *Harvard Business Review* essay, "In Praise of Followers," Robert E. Kelley says the success of a company depends as much on the nurturing of effective followers as it does effective leaders. Self-confident followers see colleagues as allies and their leaders pretty much as equals. Good leaders know how to follow even as they set an example for others. Effective followers regularly see themselves, except in terms of line responsibility, "as the equals of the leaders they follow," writes Kelley. "They are more apt to openly and unapologetically disagree with leadership and less likely to be intimidated by hierarchy and organizational structure. At the same time, they can see that the people they follow are, in turn, following the lead of others, and they try to appreciate the goals and needs of the team and the organization."⁵⁵

Effective followers are willing to tell the truth, as in speaking truth to those in power. "Followers who tell the truth, and leaders who listen to it, are an unbeatable combination."⁵⁶

It is in this sense that several writers conceptualize a leader as a servant, or servant leader. Robert K. Greenleaf, a former AT&T executive, says his ideas about the leader as servant, or servant as leader, came from his reading of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*. In that story a band of men are on a mythical journey. A central figure in the story is Leo, who accompanies the party as their servant, performing menial chores yet also sustaining the group with songs and spirit. He becomes a special presence. All goes well until Leo disappears, at which point the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They are lost without their servant leader. The moral to Greenleaf's borrowed allegory is that the indispensable leader is often seen as servant, and this simple reality is the key to the leader's effectiveness. A second lesson is that those who are leaders don't always look like leaders.⁵⁷

Greenleaf says leaders are only as good as their ability to win the confidence of those they lead. An old military manual observed: "No man is a leader until his appointment is ratified in the minds and hearts of his men."

Not everyone is comfortable with this conception of leadership. Military and sports leaders, long accustomed to hierarchical command and control systems, are understandably uncomfortable with these notions.

Thus Arnold "Red" Auerbach, legendary coach and former president of the Boston Celtics, chides the leader-as-follower theory summarized in the preceding paragraphs. "Can you imagine a team in which players picked other players and decided on substitutions? It is absolutely ludicrous," writes Auerbach. "Or can you imagine a business run by people without authority or by people who are not in a position to assume the responsibility of failure?" Auerbach, echoing Plato, asks, "Can a ship be run without a captain? It would undoubtedly founder."⁵⁸

Auerbach probably misunderstands Kelley's and Greenleaf's suggestions, yet he too has a point. Even a team occasionally forces its coach or captain to resign

or relinquish command as the crew did on the minesweeper *Caine* in Herman Wouk's *Caine Mutiny*, or as countless teams have done with athletic coaches who have failed to lead. Votes of no confidence come as often from the followers as they do from the board of directors or their functional equivalent. Economist Larry Summers learned that in his short tenure as president of Harvard University. The leader who refuses to heed his or her followers, just like the coach who fails to "read" his or her team, is eventually dismissed, or encouraged to take early retirement.

The American people have often been out in front of their so-called political leaders on many issues. Thus, the public wanted to get out of Vietnam before Congress and the White House fully caught on. The public knew Richard Nixon had to go before he fully appreciated that reality. Tax revolts and populist measures such as term limits for legislators or the Tea Party and "Occupy" movements are other instances where followers can, rightly or wrongly, point the way. Officials are sometimes the last to learn about the new directions so-called followers have decided on. The "wave elections" of 2006, 2008, and 2010 were illustrative as voters sent messages to their presidents and parties (something that in the past was more periodic such as in 1966, 1974, and 1994).

Civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis sees leaders as standing with and beside followers, not above or even out in front of the people. "A person does not become a leader simply by assuming a position, filling a chair, or earning a title. A real leader doesn't see himself as standing out in front of the people. He sees himself as standing *beside* them, *among* them," writes Lewis. "He doesn't tell people to dig a ditch; he gets down in the ditch with them and digs it himself. That's why people believe so strongly in and follow so faithfully a figure like Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, or Nelson Mandela—because they spent a lot of time getting down in the ditch and digging."⁵⁹

Thus, we have the paradox that all of us are followers, and, to a large extent, most of us are also leaders or at least have leadership instincts. Those who temporarily serve as leaders are no exception. Effective organizations need effective leaders as well as effective followers who provide the energy, ideas, and legitimacy. In the end, it is an engagement and a mutual dependency.

The larger lesson here is to embrace the paradox that we are all leaders and all followers, all leaders and all managers, and we need to recognize when we should emphasize one or the other. "It has been my observation," writes management and leadership scholar William Rosenbach, "that in high performing groups or organizations, leaders and followers are very comfortable switching roles when the situation calls for it."⁶⁰ In such organizations you'll often find that followers mentor their "leaders," and the forward-thinking leader, who may be rather rigid or fixed about the organization's values, is strikingly flexible in how the values are operationalized.

Those who have worked in community and civic development are similarly struck at how often a redefinition of leadership detached from formal positions and formal authority enables self-authorizing individuals to step forward and provide fresh solutions and imaginative, collaborative policymaking. "Rather than characterizing civics as the interaction of citizens with government focused on its oversight and operation," writes David Crisp, "this emerging understanding broadens this description to include the role of ordinary citizens and others in the organization and workings of society in order to address common concerns." Crisp adds, "Embedded in this enlarged understanding is the notion that each of us shares directly in both the problems and opportunities of civic life and so bear some of the responsibility for making progress."⁶¹

The "Is It the Leader or Is It the Context?" Paradox

One of the oldest and most debated paradoxes is the fascinating debate as to whether history is shaped by heroic change agents or whether leaders and their followers are primarily and more decisively shaped by their times, by events, and by the economic, social, and physical circumstances in which they live.

Be forewarned: we necessarily revisit this paradox at several places in our book because this "agency" versus "context" is such an iconic debate. Context shapes and limits opportunities, but individual agency (a rational, responsible, impactful individual) is always possible and is always "in play." Prophets and visionaries are often among us, yet we are not necessarily listening.

Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) held that great leaders, by which he meant individuals of genius and original insight, made all the difference. To Carlyle, heroic and powerful men made history, forced change, got things done. The history of the world is but the biography of "great men."⁶² Carlyle's distaste for democracy and celebration of the charismatic leader led him to oversimplify reality and glorify strength and power. Carlyle is by no means alone. Plutarch, Machiavelli, Confucius, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many others celebrated the indispensable impact of notable leaders. "The notion that a people can run itself and its affairs anonymously," wrote the philosopher William James, "is now well known to be the silliest of absurdities. Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small . . . these are the sole factors in human progress."⁶³

Biographers invariably leave the impression that the subjects of their biographies—generals, presidents, corporate chieftains, famous coaches and conductors—made a significant difference.⁶⁴ "All roads lead to Lincoln," says historian James McPherson in explaining both the conduct and the outcome of the Civil War.⁶⁵

Many historians would agree with President Harry Truman who once said: "Men make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better."⁶⁶ Truman is a good example. He made a difference in the Berlin Airlift, in the Marshall Plan, in the Truman Doctrine, in dropping the atomic bomb.

This is not to say that citizens can expect saviors or that people can sit around passively waiting for another Lincoln, Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mandela. Still, people in business, politics, the media, and higher education regularly lament the absence of visionary leaders in their fields. Those in high positions are depicted as pygmies compared to leaders of the past, or in contrast to certain leaders in other companies or other countries. Thus: "I wish we had leaders with vision in my company; they just don't think big or long term here." "If we only had a leader with a capital 'L' this could be a far better place." "Our leaders are stuck up there (on those high floors) where the rubber meets the air, but they don't lead and I'm afraid they don't know what leadership is all about." Or as Lee Iacocca asked a few years ago: "Where are the voices of leaders who can inspire us to action and make us stand taller? ... Where have all the leaders gone?"⁶⁷

Social scientists, however, say that our preoccupation with heroic or savior agents is wrongheaded. Indeed many scholars question the impact of leaders in general. It is hard, they say, to measure the precise influence or effects of top leaders. One student of top federal executives concluded that even those who "hurled themselves into the fray" had little impact on the policies and program accomplishments of their organizations. They make their mark "in inches, not miles," and their overall influence is incremental, not dramatic.⁶⁸

A second student of organizational decision making finds that much of the job of an administrator in most organizations involves the mundane work of making a bureaucracy run efficiently. "It is filled with activities quite distant from those implied in a conception of administration as heroic leadership." He adds that, when an organization's system is working well, "variations will be due largely to variables unrelated to variations in top leaders. Where top leadership affects variation in outcomes, the system is probably not functionally well."⁶⁹

Another report concludes that our faith in leadership usually exceeds the reality of measurable control by leaders and is used "to account for variance that is in fact uncontrollable." We may think leaders count for a lot in part because leaders spend so much time claiming credit and symbolically inflating their role and control. "It may be that the romance and the mystery surrounding leadership concepts are critical for maintaining follower-ship and that they contribute significantly to the responsiveness of individuals to the needs and goals of the collective organization."⁷⁰

The British writer C. P. Snow put it succinctly when he wrote that he didn't much believe in the idea of the great leader because "great leaders emerge from circumstances and normally don't create them." Psychologist Daniel Kahneman acknowledges that business leaders, for example, do influence organizational performance, but the efforts are much smaller than a reading of most of the best-selling business press books suggests.⁷¹

If we conceive of leaders as people who make things happen that otherwise would not have happened, we are conceiving of leadership as a causal relationship. But we know that the cause is often attributable to followers, or stakeholders, or constituents, new technological inventions, bold new ideas, or favorable external developments. "There are as many leaders as there are causes," says political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, and "there is much trouble distinguishing one from the other or assigning them relative weights."⁷²

Then, of course, there are those who are in Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's school, or who are economic or social determinists of one variety or another. Larger social forces and events, they contend, explain why companies or nations succeed or fail. Leaders, Tolstoy (1828-1910) said, are mostly the pawns rather than the game changers of history. Leadership, for Tolstoy and his supporters, is significant only as illustrative human responses or reactions to events and social and economic developments. Leaders, they posit, seldom act alone—they are caught up in the web of social, economic, and geophysical phenomena. It is these factors, not temporary power-wielders, that shape the important outcomes.⁷³

Tolstoy was skeptical of the idea that larger-than-life leaders make a big difference. Leaders or office holders, to Tolstoy, were more often confused, clueless, and seldom in control of what was going on. His writings in *War and Peace* suggest that history is full of ambiguity and arises from complex interaction of countless, often contradictory and insignificant, impersonal events. Thus leaders are shaped by their environments more than they are the shapers.⁷⁴

This may be an old and defining debate, yet there are few signs of resolution. Understanding this debate, however, helps remind us of the enigmatic aspects of the leadership process.

We are rarely sure what causes people to follow a leader, and we are seldom sure either how much leaders lead or are being led, whether by the followers or the requirements of culture and context. It may be more useful to conceptualize the leader as an intervening rather than the primary variable, for plainly there are always a number of shaping factors—social, economic, organizational, cultural, and psychological—that cause leaders to do what they do.

Leaders obviously like to think they make a difference and some doubtless do. Americans like to think of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as indispensable men or at least something close to that.⁷⁵ Yet it is sometimes

hard to measure precisely the difference even they, and leaders like them, made. Among the important tasks of a leader are symbolic and psychological roles—of evoking loyalty and affirming significance, purpose, and meaning in an organization—and these are as elusive to measure as they are vital to the health of complex organizations.

Conclusion

Leadership will always mean different things to different people. For most of us it is an evocative word rich in positive meaning, as in empowerment and liberation. Yet for others it connotes manipulation, deception, intimidation, or coercion. And everyone is partly right.

Life is a struggle for many and a paradoxical puzzle for most in part because so much of life is made up of opposites. The life of leaders is paradoxical because it asks them to live in a world of simultaneous dichotomies and equilibriums, mixed with disequilibriums often in search of yet some new balance or order. A dialectical process of thesis versus antithesis in search of some new type of synthesis comes with the leadership territory.

Business theorist Charles Handy adds, "Paradox confuses us because things don't behave the way we expect them to behave!"⁷⁶ He could well have added that things often don't behave the way we "want" or "need" them to.

Leaders find ways to understand the dialectics and paradoxes, to put them to use and reframe them to shape better organizations and bringing about progress. Sometimes this involves a creative integrating of normal opposites. When the noted diplomat Richard Holbrooke was asked whether he was a Wilsonian idealist or a ruthless "realpolitiker," he rejected the either/or formula: "We cannot choose between the two; we have to blend the two." He was comfortable with American power, yet he could hardly forsake the American idealism that had inspired his Jewish parents as they sought refuge in America.⁷⁷

Certain cultures and communities celebrate decisive assertiveness and dominant styles of leadership. Others yearn for more modest servant leaders, if they are willing to tolerate leaders at all. Societal and organizational expectations of leaders vary enormously from setting to setting, according to the requirements of context. In virtually every society and setting, we require leaders to be alternately collaborative and competitive.

Leaders find themselves in a web of mutual engagements with both fellow leaders and followers. Our expectations shift. We send mixed signals. The job description of nearly any leader is full of ambiguities. Leaders are forever having to redefine and reimagine their contributions in response to how they read the requirements of context as well as expectations.

Ultimately, effective leaders wrestle with the paradoxical aspects of leadership and learn to improvise and synthesize as best they can. Effective leaders not only learn to live with these and related paradoxes but they also develop a contextual intelligence and an "integrative thinking" approach that helps them look beyond either/or decision making. Roger Martin urges leaders to learn how to integrate the obvious advantages of one possible solution without canceling out the advantage of alternative solutions. Integrative thinking, Martin adds, involves "generative reasoning, a form of reassessing that inquires into what might be rather than what is. Generative reasoning helps build a framework for creative resolutions that are sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of the real world."⁷⁸

John Heider in *The Tao of Leadership* writes that because most behaviors contain their opposites, we need to "learn to see things backwards, inside out, and upside down."⁷⁹

Psychologist Howard Gardner emphasizes that effective leaders must have, among other skills, the ability to knit together information and ideas from competing sources into a coherent strategy. "As synthesizers, they will need to be able to gather together information from disparate sources and put it together in ways that work for themselves and can be communicated to other persons."⁸⁰

No leader can be all things to all people at all times, and yet this is precisely what we would often like. An appreciation of these contradictions and paradoxes helps explain why we complain so much about leaders. It may also explain why many people shy away from what they consider the seemingly no-win situation we visit upon leaders.

In the chapters that follow, we examine more fully how leaders have coped with these enduring paradoxes and contradictions. We are especially interested in how effective leaders have often, at least for a while, managed paradoxes, learned to coexist with them, or found "ways around or out of" them. We are equally interested in examining leaders who can unlock or unleash the power of paradox. But first we tackle the challenge of defining leadership.