

Making Leadership Actionable: What We Are Learning and How We Can Use It

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Abstract

Much of the popular and academic literature on leadership has led to advice about what is required for effective leadership. This advice is usually flawed in that it does not provide guidance for how to learn to effectively apply the advice or because the advice is based on the practices of an individual in a specific context, a context that may or may not apply to the learner’s situation. An approach to leadership development based on seeing leadership as an emergent phenomenon, rather than just something that an individual does, is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

When we scan the literature on leadership, we find many books and articles representing the principles and practices of the individual leader. Much of this work, despite the level of research or experience that underlies it, amounts to prescriptions—a list of “shoulds” advising how to be a successful and effective leader. There is nothing inherently wrong with such prescriptions. Indeed, it is valuable to have the products of consultant and academic research. It is valuable to know about the lessons of leadership gleaned from leaders like Jack Welch (2001) or from the observations of consultants. And it is valuable to consider models of leadership offered by people like Jim Collins (2001) and his notion of level 5 leadership. It is important to consider the approach of Goleman, et al (2002) with its focus on emotional intelligence and leadership.

Chris Argyris (2000) has, however, challenged all of us to rethink our work on leadership and other management and business topics from the point of view of whether the advice or models are truly actionable. Argyris does not debate that much of the advice offered in most of the publications on leadership is thoughtful, has good intentions and can even be

enlightening. Instead, he questions the efficacy of such advice in guiding effective leadership behavior.

Argyris (2000, pp.7-8) offers three tests for the validity of advice. Valid advice “leads to the consequences that it predicts will occur, 2) its effectiveness persists so long as no unforeseen conditions interfere, and 3) it can be implemented and tested in the world of everyday practice.”

He goes on to state: “There are four tests for the actionability of advice. It specifies the detailed, concrete behaviors required to achieve the intended consequences; it must be crafted in the form of designs [for action —rv] that contain causal statements; people must have, or be able to be taught the concepts and skills required to implement those causal statements; and the context in which it is to be implemented does not prevent its implementation.”

Therefore, when we are considering how useful our work on leadership theory and development is, these questions must be addressed:

- Do the behaviors that we are advocating lead directly and unequivocally to the results we intend?
- Are we clear about causal relationships between actions and results?
- Can people learn to recognize and respond to situations to use the recommended skills and concepts?
- To what degree is context relevant to the action leading to intended results?

At the heart of Argyris’ argument is that much of the advice offered is espoused theory. In espoused theory we find the principles and precepts that we hold as truths, as guides to behavior. There are gaps between espoused theory and theory-in-use—what we actually do. How we behave and respond is our theory-in-use. Such gaps exist for all of us, whether we are in formal leadership positions or not. When we give flawed advice we are feeding espoused theory and not contributing a great deal to theory-in-use.

THE STATE OF OUR ADVICE

To the degree that leadership development and practice rely on the advice given to those who aspire to leadership roles it is critical that the advice be actionable. Not only does the advice influence individuals who may read some of the books on leadership, but also the design and delivery of leadership education and training programs. Since billions are spent each year on such programs having this guidance be actionable is all the more important. In the examples provided here advice on teamwork, listening to one’s own voice, trust, and the role of learning in relation to leadership are explored. Argyris’ criteria are applied to each.

Teamwork. An entrepreneur and CEO (I will call him Arlen) of a service company has consistently espoused teamwork. He would tell his staff that in order for them to be effective with their clients they needed to address client needs as a team. Yet he did not participate in the team or engage other executives as a team. He met with them separately, issued orders and expected them to do what they were told. He would tell his staff how they should support clients and then absent himself from further involvement, except to find fault when things went wrong.

This strongly introverted leader did exhibit considerable strengths. Arlen built a strong company— with the help of others. He has a capacity to inspire others and to share his optimistic enthusiasm in a way that attracts others. Once attracted, however, many have found his leadership style to be demoralizing. Data gathered from members of his executive team pinpointed specific behaviors that undermined his effectiveness.

Arlen's espoused theory was that people should work together as a team. However, his theory in use was autocratic and heroic as he avoided situations in which he would have to participate in a team. When bottom-line performance diminished, his response was to issue orders and solutions while complaining that people weren't following "the system." Some senior executives left his company and those that remained felt that the corporate culture was becoming counter-productive.

The full implications of the difference between Arlen's espoused theory and theory-in-use have yet to play out. Yet the prognosis is problematic. Despite getting feedback from Hay-McBer's 360° Emotional Competency Inventory, other assessments and conversations with consultants he is unable to consider another approach to leadership that might be more effective. In effect, he is only being himself, doing things his way. He is certain that his approach is the one that will result in successes for the company. As an entrepreneur, his approach built a multi-million dollar company and he is not inclined to change. We are challenged to find a way to give advice effectively to this leader.

Listen to Your Own Voice: Like Arlen, Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic, insists on listening to his own voice.

“The test of leadership is ignoring those outside voices and learning to hear the one deep within. As a CEO, your attention ultimately has to be on the long run -- and that is, of necessity, a lonely run. The voices clamoring for your attention will be many. Your job is to find your own.” (George 2003)

This is Bill George's espoused theory. However, as an applied leadership dictum, another leader following his own voice may not generate the considerable financial and leadership successes of a Bill George. Simply adopting the imperative of listening to one's own voice is highly unlikely to look the same for each leader, much less have the same positive results. For one thing, one's own voice may offer flawed advice.

While Bill George's article (2003) on leadership is inspiring, how well does his advice meet the criteria for validity and actionability put forward by Argyris above? First, he does not specify the concrete behaviors required to "listen to one's own voice." For example, what if one has multiple "voices," messages that are competing? This could be the product of competing commitments (Kegan and Lahey, 2001) that George does not address.

Second, we are missing a design for action with a causal statement in George's advice. In what way does it make clear what the steps and results are? We might try to extrapolate those steps from looking at his extraordinarily successful career, but the presentation does not provide us with that. In addition, one wonders about those who have followed their own voice only to fail to achieve the results they were seeking.

Third, we are left to guess whether people can be taught the concepts and skills because the causal statements are ambiguous. Finally, while this approach may have worked for Bill George in the situations he was in, what evidence is there that it would work for others in other contexts? We cannot be sure that the business and life conditions faced by George will be the same or similar to those being faced by other potential leaders.

Trust: Roseanne Badowski (2003) offers from her experience with Jack Welch some lessons that were of very high value for her. One was, "in business, trust is everything." While we can appreciate her enthusiasm and truly believe that trust is critical in business as in all human relationships, let's look at the advice offered through Argyris' lense.

We can put aside the story of Jack Welch's GE blowing off (literally) the roof of a plastics plant thus polluting the surrounding waters of the Hudson River with PCBs. The company refused to take action for some time and then, when they did, they refused to clean up all of the environmental damage. This was reported widely in the newspapers and raised the ire of many environmentalists, including those who work for GE. While this company behavior does not seem to foster trust, we can move on to the advice gained from Welch that "To lead effectively leaders must first gain the trust of their people—and then maintain it." (Badowski 2003) To accomplish this, don't hold people responsible for honest mistakes. This will generate trust, openness, honesty and being upfront. Let's apply Argyris' criteria for actionability:

1. Specifies detailed, concrete behaviors required to achieve the intended consequences. Not holding people accountable for honest mistakes is concrete non-behavior; it does not specify what one is to do instead.
2. Contains causal statements. The causal statement is that not doing something results in trust. It does not specify what causes the trust other than the absence of holding people accountable for honest mistakes.
3. People can be taught how to implement the causal statements. People may be taught not to hold others accountable for honest mistakes, but it is a challenge to teach people to recognize when a mistake is honest or not?

4. The context for implementation does not prevent its implementation. What worked for Jack Welch in GE may not work for a leader in another company – or even in GE today.

None of this is intended to demean the value of Ms. Badowski's reflections. They are thoughtful and hold out hope that leaders can learn and implement trust-building behaviors. Yet, as a representative sample of advice to leaders, it fails the test. It is flawed advice.

What would be required then for leadership advice not to be flawed? Argyris offers the following thoughts on what is required for advice or propositions to be actionable. He states,

“advice or propositions should stipulate the following:

- The theories-in-use that specify the sequence of behaviors required to produce the intended consequences or goals.
- The theories-in-use should be crafted in ways that make the causality transparent.
- The causality embedded in the theories-in-use is testable robustly in the context of everyday life.
- Actionable knowledge must specify the values that underlie and govern the designs-in use.”

[p. 239]

What would that require for supporting the question of trust in leadership? First, we would have to specify leadership behaviors that lead to trust in relationships with followers. Even if we could specify what those behaviors would be under all circumstances, at best we could offer some espoused theories about being truthful and when-and-if it is okay not to tell the whole truth. But we are left with the question of what is required to make the idea of trust building actionable on the part of an aspiring leader.

Learning. Steven Covey (1991) is but one author who offers a great deal of advice for leaders. An example is that leaders are continually learning. He doesn't say much about what they are learning, but he offers examples of how they learn through training, reading, classes, listening to others, developing new skills and interests. Virtually any learning experience, it may be concluded, will enhance leadership. For example, learning to keep commitments by being serious and intentional.

This is inspiring to those of us who value learning, whether we are leaders or not. However, Covey's advice is not actionable. He fails to show the sequence of behaviors required to produce effective leadership. He fails to show the causality between his learning principle and effective leadership. It is unclear how this principle or theory-in-use would be testable in leadership contexts. Finally, he does not specify the values that

underlie his advice about learning. Particularly, there is not a demonstrated link between values and leader performance.

Again, this is not to say that Covey's message has no value. It is inspirational and helps us think about the relationship between learning and being effective as leaders. But it is almost certain that every individual would apply this perspective in different ways. Also, it is unclear what results they would achieve.

There are two reasons for taking seriously these concerns regarding the ways we write about and think about leadership. The first is that the notion of flawed advice has considerable implications for leadership development. We cannot rely on advice giving for developing leaders. The second is that we need to shift our perspective about leadership from being exclusively about "the heroic leader" to one that is more inclusive of the factors that are present in effective leadership situations (Volckmann, 2001). Clearly, since context is critical to providing effective advice, we need an approach to leadership that accounts for context.

MOVING BEYOND ADVICE

Educational and Training Activities: There is a spectrum of educational and training activities appropriate to developing leaders. They can learn about the industry they are in and its position in relation to the global economy. They can learn communication skills and negotiation skills. They can learn about the different styles and preferences people have and how to engage effectively with those people while drawing on their own strengths. They can learn about themselves, their emotional intelligence, their values and even their preferred conflict management and leadership competencies.

Much of this learning may lead to flawed advice for leaders unless they are effectively applied from their positions of responsibility. Various studies have shown that in education and training programs implementation of learning is significantly diminished within a short period of time, particularly if there is not an immediate and direct application in a supportive environment.

In one company we introduced a training program in coaching skills for executive leaders, some of whom were based in the corporate office with the rest in the field. The culture of the central office was very rigid and status oriented. Central office executives were ineffective in bringing these coaching skills into their repertoires. Those executives in the field were able to significantly influence the culture of their groups and played a role that was designed to be focused on developing those reporting to them. Most of the executives in the field became quite effective in integrating coaching into their leadership styles. This is not insignificant in that Goleman et al (2002) have identified coaching as the sixth of the leadership competencies and the one least accessed by executives.

There is a growing body of literature reporting the effectiveness of executive coaching in enhancing executive performance. However, there has not been conclusive evidence to this point. Many of the studies that I have seen are done by consulting organizations and

naturally seek to promote their coaching services. A recent study was completed under a grant to CompassPoint (2003), a nonprofit services organization in San Francisco. Forty hours of coaching was provided to twenty-four executive directors of non-profit organizations. Their conclusion:

“... coaching appears to have had a profound impact on EDs and the organizations they lead. Improving their leadership and management skills, and increasing their confidence in their ability to do their jobs well...coaching appears to be a relatively inexpensive, high impact way to develop the leadership of EDs while they are in their roles.”

Executive coaching can prove to be a decisive factor in changing behavior and beliefs. For example, one of our clients was the Comptroller of a medium tech company in Silicon Valley. She was from Southeast Asia and had worked in this country for a few years before joining the company. When the Vice President of Finance announced his impending retirement she gave herself no chance at succeeding him. She reasoned that she had not been at the company long enough and that the other members of the executive team would not accept her in that role.

As a result of a coaching conversation she decided to interview, individually, each of the members of the executive team (including the current CFO) about how they saw her potential for filling the position and what she would need to do to be able to perform effectively. After receiving this input and feedback she went to talk to the CEO. She presented how she saw her strengths and what she saw that she needed to learn and improve to be effective in the position. She also presented a plan for how she would address these issues, including a semester long program for executives in finance strategy offered at a local, but major, university. She then asked for the CEO's feedback about how he saw her approach and what he might add to her need for development and learning. The CEO approved her development plan, including continued coaching, and six months later, when the VP of Finance retired, he appointed her to that position.

The point of this example is that coaching alone is not sufficient in many cases for leadership development. However, it is often a valuable and even necessary component of a leadership development plan and its implementation. At the University of Notre Dame, Leo Burke, former head of leadership development for Motorola, is the Associate Dean for Executive Education and leads an executive development program that provides a combination of classroom education and coaching. This program is being well received and offers an example of how coaching can support leadership development.

One of the reasons that coaching is invaluable is that it works with individuals to bring learning back into their environment and explore its relevance and utility from the perspective of their role and the life and business conditions in their situation. This is an important point. Effective implementation of learning and support from coaching requires that attention be paid to the individual leader and the life and business conditions the leader is experiencing.

And this brings us to the second point: We need to understand leadership in a way that does not focus so exclusively on the traits and behaviors of the individual. The focus on traits and principles is instructive but results in advice that is not actionable, that is, unless it is supported by something more than advice. Learning about one's self, one's traits, and getting feedback about one's behavior can be part of a very powerful developmental process. Coaching provides an effective process for supporting this. But we need to consider other factors, as well.

The Leader and More. Leadership is about the leader and more. Various authors have presented perspectives that go beyond the focus on the individual leader. Kouzes and Posner (1987), for example, recognize the importance of the expectations of followers. Perhaps the most interesting example of going beyond the focus on the individual is the work of James O'Toole (2001) of USC. While his previous publications focused on the individual as leader O'Toole states, "Instead of leadership being a solo act, an aria sung by the CEO, in these organizations [large corporations] it is a shared responsibility, more like a chorus of diverse voices singing in unison." In other words, leadership is found throughout the organization.

O'Toole states further that in his research he "observed people at all levels in these organizations..."

- Act more like owners and entrepreneurs than employees or hired hands (that is, they assume owner like responsibility for financial performance and managing risk).
- Take the initiative to solve problems and to act, in general, with a sense of urgency.
- Willingly accept accountability for meeting commitments, and for living the values of the organization.
- Share a common philosophy and language of leadership that paradoxically includes tolerance for contrary views and a willingness to experiment.
- Create, maintain, and adhere to systems and procedures designed to measure and reward these distributed leadership behaviors."

O'Toole's analysis indicates that dependence on a single leader is risky and that "no one individual, no matter how gifted a leader, can be 'right' all of time."

His analysis goes on to point out organization systems that support leadership throughout a company or organization from vision and strategy to communications and knowledge transfer. With these supporting systems the organization can be agile in the face of the rapid pace of change and innovation because leadership becomes an organization-wide phenomenon. Approaching leadership with perspectives such as O'Toole's is vital in the

face of accelerating turbulence (Vaill 1996), challenges to managing the unknowable (Stacey 1992) and the unthinkable (Mitroff 2004).

A New Understanding of Leadership. It is not a huge leap from O'Toole's work to a new understanding of leadership. Leadership can be understood as an emergent phenomenon produced by the assumptions, beliefs and behaviors of individuals, as well as the culture and systems that are in place in the company or organization. It is about the individual leaders – their self-knowledge, knowledge of the business, skills and behaviors – and it is about the composite values and beliefs of people within the company, as well as the structures, processes and systems. These four dimensions of leadership are: 1) what is internal to the individual, 2) the individuals' behaviors, 3) what is internal to the system and 4) the expression of the system. Let's take a brief look at each.

What is internal to the individual leader would be assumptions, beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, mental models – there are a variety of ways of talking about what is within each of us. This would include mental models about what leadership is. These would be the individual's espoused theories. Other examples would include the communications and negotiations skills and other knowledge derived from education, training and experience.

Secondly, the behaviors of individual leaders would represent their theories-in-use. Through their behaviors, in the context of the system, the individual leaders contribute to the conditions that allow leadership to emerge. These behaviors may take many forms from delegating tasks, to giving inspirational presentations to initiating innovations or rapid responses to crises. How they do these things will depend on the integrity found in the relationship between espoused theories and theories-in-use, as well as what is required by the context.

Third, the culture of the company sets the context for the emergence of leadership. For example, the definition of what constitutes leadership communications will be found in the culture and includes the values, assumptions and beliefs held within the company about effective leadership. In one company culture autocratic communications styles will be valued as evidence of leadership. In another, a sense of responsibility and authority held by many individuals may suggest the presence of leadership in many places in the organization. Basic cultural values related to diversity can affect the capacity of the culture to hold and recognize emergent leadership.

Finally, leadership overtly shows up in the company as a system. Technology shapes the range of leadership communications. Organization structure may be used to define legitimacy in relation to leadership. The management of information flow into and through the organization may set the range of potential for emergent leadership and consequent effective engagement with change.

Strengthening Leadership in the Company

Leadership emerges from all four contexts: individual beliefs and behaviors, company culture and systems. This approach leads to a far more effective way to understand and appreciate leadership as an emergent phenomenon, rather than a list of traits, skills and principles. The nature of the advice that can emerge from such an approach is conditional. The developmental process depends on that internal place so important to Bill George in that it will be continually tested through the use of action inquiry (Torbert 2004) supported by mentoring, coaching or peer relationships.

Under conditions of change, ambiguity and uncertainty we cannot know in advance what kind of leadership will be required and who will provide it. By persisting in our historic ways of understanding and developing leaders we risk stunting effective leadership in the face of complexity. When one is at the top of the organization, it is appropriate to have a sign on one's desk that states, "The buck stops here!" Harry Truman knew that. But this doesn't mean that his actions were all that mattered.

We can reframe our ideas of leadership and its development. We can begin to design leadership development programs that embrace all of these important contexts of leadership. We can recognize that executive leadership is important, but in the face of complexity it is not sufficient, thereby making leadership development a priority for others in the company, as well.

There are many organizations experimenting with innovative approaches to leadership development from student programs, such as that at Fort Hays University in Kansas, to the many innovations at the Center for Creative Leadership, and the cutting edge work at the Integral Institute and the Executive Development Program at Notre Dame. We continue to learn about the use of scenarios for leadership development and have hardly realized their power (Volckmann 2005). But a decreased emphasis on advice is also a shift toward re-conceptualizing the learning process for potential leaders. Instead of focusing only on what other leaders have learned, we can infuse leadership development with approaches that foster the capabilities of individuals to understand their contexts and the implications for choice regarding leadership. We can also examine how the context shapes the potential for leadership emergence and begin to redesign our systems as needed with that factor in mind.

This world of complexity demands expanded capacity for business and other organizations. By pursuing strategies such as those suggested here the potential for effective leadership in organizations will be greatly increased. Furthermore, leadership studies can be enhanced by finding the true and actionable advice in the diverse approaches in all streams of leadership theory and research methodology (Wilber 2005).

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