

Is Leadership Overrated?

by Russ Bredholt, Jr.

Question during Dutch TV interview to management Professor Henry Mintzberg:

"What would you recommend for leadership in the 21st century?"

Answer from Professor Mintzberg: *"Less of it."*

When you Google "leadership" and 735 million responses show up in 0.41 seconds it's safe to say that is a topic of great interest. Yet leadership is not just a subject to explore or a position on an organizational chart. It's an industry, and sometimes a self-serving one at that.

Consider the following

Almost \$14 billion is spent annually by U.S. firms on leadership development programs. Global expenditures make that enhancement cost go much higher. (Leadership Development Factbook 2012)

Colleges and universities offer hundreds of degree courses on leadership with customized programs from elite business schools costing as much as \$150,000 for each participant.

Those funds are often expended, reports the McKinsey Quarterly, without regard to context (one size fits all), understanding the root cause of behavior, or measuring results from the significant financial investment in programming.

An inversion

As Daniel Askt wrote in the Bookshelf column of The Wall Street Journal, "There appears to be an inverse correlation between the growth of the leadership industry and the quality of the leaders we've seen in business as well as public life. Perhaps instead of reading books that purport to instruct on leadership--offering up more cliché than wisdom--would-be leaders would do better to delve into books about individuals who have grappled with the challenges and ordeals of guiding an army, a nation or a daring enterprise."

The late historian and Pulitzer prize-winning author, James MacGregor Burns, once observed: "If we know all too much about leaders, we know far too little about *leadership*."

We make lists

Too often leadership is reduced to a subjective list of traits (honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring) none of which show up equally in any one person, and seldom include anything having to do with wisdom or clear thinking. Along with traits come management concepts (just-in-time inventory, core competence, excellence, zero defects) and jargon to reinforce behavioral norms (buy-in, empower, move the needle, alignment).

An example of adapting jargon from other industries comes from General Electric. An article in the current [Bloomberg Business Week Magazine](#) draws attention to CEO Jeff Immelt's use of the word "pivot" when it comes to reorienting GE's strategy toward industrial information technology. Pivot, a term borrowed from Silicon Valley, replaces "idea jams" in the GE management team lexicon.

Speaking of, what's the relationship between leadership and teams?

Is it a coincidence that *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni, has been on a variety of best-seller lists for 18 years?

The upside of leadership

We believe that leadership, with noble character and strong moral principles, is a valued quality.

The right leadership at the right time in the right place makes a big difference in the climate, progress, health, and success of any organization. However, those at the top often have limited impact on the everyday practices of their firms.

Perhaps the greater impression on subordinates is found in a leader's symbolic role such as inspiration and motivation. Indeed studies show that middle managers who worked for a company whose CEO seemed more determined and better at communicating and articulating a sense of mission and vision, were more committed to their companies.

There's a direct correlation between a CEO with self-transcendent values and how employees respond to uplifting moments.

When a CEO secretly harbors selfish values (i.e., high on self-enhancement), and it doesn't take long for hidden thoughts to be revealed, middle managers were not much motivated and committed to the firm whatever the CEO said or did. (Academic Journal Science Quarterly)

If leadership is overrated, what's underrated?

Where's the imbalance? There are three distinct areas which are underrepresented by proponents of leadership:

- Management performance (getting things done)
- Marketplace (customers have a big say in your success)
- Followership ("Whither wilt thou lead me?"--William Shakespeare's Hamlet)

Management visionary Peter Drucker blamed the excesses of corporate America on the "bloated concept of leadership." He believed businesses have more than enough leaders; what they really need are competent managers who can do the hard work of decision-making, planning, and coaching.

What's missing in the conversation?

Writer Joshua Rothman explains in greater detail why the focus on leadership dominates our discussions. His essay is worth reading if you aspire to improve your organization's culture, working relationships, and operational balance.

Below is a link to Rothman's thought-provoking article about the potentially dangerous obsession with leadership, and why, to quote Professor Mintzberg, we may need "less of it" in the future:

[Shut Up and Sit Down--Why the leadership industry rules](#)

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