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SHUT UP AND SIT DOWN

Why the leadership industry rules.

By Joshua Rothman

The Titanic sank on April 15, 1912. Nine days later, Thomas Hardy composed a poem about the disaster called "The Convergence of the Twain." Many poets were mourning the dead; Hardy took a different approach. He asked readers to contemplate the accident's prehistory: to imagine how, even as the great ship was being built, the iceberg—its "sinister mate"—had also been growing. "No mortal eye could see / The intimate welding of their later history," Hardy wrote. But, even so, "They were bent / By paths coincident / On being anon twin halves of one august event."

The poem's theory of history—as something that unfolds through fated convergences—is also a theory of leadership. For leadership to exist, a leader must cross paths with a crisis; an exemplary person must meet her "sinister mate." Without an answering crisis, a would-be leader remains just a promising custodian of potential. (Imagine Lincoln without the Civil War or F.D.R. without the Depression.) Before a leader can pull us out of despair, we have to fall into it. For this reason, a melancholy ambivalence can cling to even the most inspiring stories of leadership.

People who fetishize leadership sometimes find themselves longing for crisis. They yearn for emergency, dreaming of a doomsday to be narrowly averted. Last month, Donald Trump's campaign released its first official TV advertisement. The ad features a procession of alarming images—the San Bernardino shooters, a crowd at passport control, the flag of Syria's Al Nusra Front—designed to communicate the idea of a country under siege. But the ad does more than stoke fear; it also excites, because it suggests that we've arrived at a moment welcoming to the emergence of a strong and electrifying leader. (Trump, a voice-over explains, will "quickly cut the head off ISIS—and take their oil.") By making America's moment of crisis seem as big (or "huge") as possible, Trump makes himself seem more consequential, too.

Many of today's challenges are too complex to yield to the exercise of leadership alone. Even so, we are inclined to see the problems of the present in terms of crises and leaders. "Crises of leadership are the order of the day at the beginning of the twenty-first century," Elizabeth Samet writes, in the introduction to "Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers" (Norton). "If we live in a world of crisis," she continues, "we also live in a world that romanticizes crisis—that finds in it fodder for an addiction to the twenty-four-hour news cycle, multiple information streams, and constant stimulation." Samet believes that our growing addiction to the narrative of crisis has gone hand in hand with an increasing veneration of leadership—a veneration that leaves us vulnerable to "the false prophets, the smooth operators, the gangsters, and the demagogues" who say they can save us. She quotes John Adams, who suggested, in a letter to a friend, that there was something both undemocratic and unwise in the lionization of leadership. The country won't improve, Adams wrote, until the people begin to "consider themselves as the fountain of power." He went on, "They must be taught to reverence themselves, instead of adoring their servants, their generals, admirals, bishops, and statesmen." It can be dangerous to decide that you need to be led.

Our faith in the value of leadership is durable—it survives, again and again, our disappointment with actual leaders. Polls suggest that, even though voters who support Trump are frustrated with the people in charge, they aren't disillusioned about leadership in general: they are attracted to Trump's "leadership qualities" and to an authoritarian view of life. In a sense, they're caught in a feedback loop. The glorification of leadership makes existing leaders seem disappointing by comparison, leading to an ever more desperate search for "real" leaders to replace them. Trump's supporters aren't the only ones caught in this loop. Schools that used to talk about "citizenship" now claim to train "the leaders of tomorrow"; academics study leadership in think tanks and institutes; leadership experts emote their way through talks about it on YouTube. According to an analysis by the consulting firm McKinsey, two-thirds of executives say that "leadership development and succession management" constitute their No. 1 "human capital priority"; another study found that American companies spend almost fourteen billion dollars annually on leadership-training seminars.

Presidential candidates, of course, invoke the idea of leadership with special urgency. In his victory speech after the Iowa caucuses, Ted Cruz praised Rick Perry, Glenn Beck, and other "leaders who have stood and led"; in the sixteen Presidential debates since August, candidates have used the word "leadership" more than a hundred times. It's an especially useful term for politicians. "Experience" and "expertise" are virtues with downsides. "Leadership" sums up, in a vague way, everything that's desirable and none of what's not.

If you're flexible in how you translate the word "leadership," you'll find that people have been thinking about it for a very long time. Plato, Confucius, and the poet (or poets) who wrote the Bhagavad Gita thought about leadership; so did Machiavelli. Historians have detailed the lives and decisions of individual leaders. Still, case studies and books of leadership advice don't add up to the kind of systematic description you'd need in order to say that someone has "leadership qualities." The attempt to create that description—to develop, essentially, a science of leadership—began around a century ago, but has met little success.

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In 1991, Joseph Rost, a professor of leadership studies at the University of San Diego, read as much of the modern leadership literature as he could, reaching back to 1900. (After reading a comparatively small stack of leadership books, I am in awe of his achievement.) Rost found that writers on leadership had defined it in more than two hundred ways. Often, they glided between incompatible definitions within the same book: they argued that leaders should be simultaneously decisive and flexible, or visionary and open-minded. The closest they came to a consensus definition of leadership was the idea that it was "good management." In practice, Rost wrote, "*leadership* is a word that has come to mean all things to all people." He urged his colleagues to get their act together and, a few years later, retired.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

The Immigrants Deported to Death and Violence

In the two decades since, dozens of academic programs have sprung up to study leadership. It's now possible to get a Ph.D. in "leadership and change" or "ethical and creative leadership." This hasn't clarified anything. In a book called "The End of Leadership," from 2012, Barbara Kellerman, a founding director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership, wrote that "we don't have much better an idea of how to grow good leaders, or of how to stop or at least slow bad leaders, than we did a hundred or even a thousand years ago." She points out that, historically, the "trajectory" of leadership has been "about the devolution of power," from the king to the voters, say, or the boss to the shareholders. In recent years, technological and economic changes like social media and globalization have made leaders less powerful.

Leadership may be, by its nature, an anxious and inconstant idea. Like "status" or "alienation," the word "leadership" points not toward a stable concept but toward a problem or affliction unique to modernity. In the 1922 book "Economy and Society," a foundational text in the study of leadership, the sociologist Max Weber distinguished between the "charismatic" leadership of traditional societies and the "bureaucratic" leadership on offer in the industrialized world. In the past, Weber wrote, the world revolved around "old-type" rulers, who could be "moved by personal sympathy and favor, by grace and gratitude." Modern rulers, by contrast, are supposed to be emotionally detached; they work within a network of laws and systems designed to eliminate nonrational considerations like love and hatred. Weber was getting at a core problem for modern leaders. How can the performance of bureaucratic tasks (such as the design of a health-care overhaul) be infused with charismatic warmth? Conversely, how can you realize your personal ambitions (say, toppling a Middle Eastern autocrat who tried to kill your father) within the systems of bureaucracy? How, in short, can the charismatic and the bureaucratic be combined? Perhaps leadership is confusing because it's confused: it embodies one of the central conundrums of modern life.

For a long time, leadership experts remained nostalgic for old-type leaders. In the nineteenth century, books such as Thomas Carlyle's "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History" attempted to isolate, through historical surveys, the character traits of "great men"; well into the twentieth century, many scholars elaborated on a "trait model" of leadership. They proposed that leaders possessed certain personality traits—courage, decisiveness, intelligence, attractiveness, and so on—that made them intrinsically followable, bureaucracy be damned. A great deal of time was spent thinking about how leadership qualities might be detected, so that leaders could be identified in advance of their elevation.

The trait model endures. Many leadership gurus talk about Jack Welch and Steve Jobs as people with the right stuff to lead. But plenty of people with the right stuff fail as leaders. In a 2002 book called "Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic C.E.O.s," Rakesh Khurana, a professor at Harvard Business School, took stock of corporate America's investment in the trait model of leadership. Khurana found that many companies passed over good internal candidates for C.E.O. in favor of "messiah" figures with exceptional charisma.

Charismatic C.E.O.s are often famous, and they make good copy; in 1997, business magazines featured photographs of C. Michael Armstrong, the incoming C.E.O. of A.T. & T., astride his Harley, riding to the company's rescue. The appointment of such figures can inspire upticks in stock prices. But they also tend to be less knowledgeable, and more expensive, than internal candidates. Many underperform and are quickly fired; they are then replaced by other rock-star C.E.O.s. The system perpetuates itself because of leadership nostalgia. C.E.O. searches are often undertaken during moments of perceived crisis, and investors dream of a tribal chief who can subdue, through strength of personality, the vast forces shaping corporate fate. They pressure corporate boards to select candidates who "instill confidence." This approach vastly overestimates not just the importance of a C.E.O.'s personality but the importance of C.E.O.s in general. Khurana points out, deflatingly, that there is little evidence for the "C.E.O. effect." The most powerful factor determining a company's performance is the condition of the market in which it operates.

By the mid-twentieth century, alternatives to the trait model of leadership emerged. Experts have studied leadership psychologically, sociologically, and even "existentially-experientially." Many have settled on a "process-based" approach. They've come to see leadership as something that unfolds in stages. A problem emerges, a leader is selected, a goal is developed, a team is assembled, the goal is reëvaluated, and so on. From this perspective, the working life of an organization begins to look like an unending sequence of leadership events. A leader's job is to shepherd the team through the leadership process.

Process models favor the bureaucratic over the charismatic, and have a number of advantages over trait models. For one thing, they suggest that leadership is learnable: you just observe the process. For another, they're capable of differentiating between the designated leader—often a broad-shouldered white guy with a power tie and a corner office—and the actual, "emergent" leaders around whom, at particular moments, events coalesce. (Research shows that workplaces often function because of unrecognized emergent leaders, many of them women.) Most fundamentally, process models acknowledge that "being a leader" isn't an identity but, rather, a set of actions. It's not someone you are. It's something you do.

Last year, Danny Boyle and Aaron Sorkin's film "Steve Jobs" relied almost exclusively on the trait model of leadership: it suggested that Jobs succeeded because of his powerful personality. Watching the film, though, you couldn't figure out what Jobs actually did. By contrast, if you read a detailed, process-oriented account of Jobs's career ("Becoming Steve Jobs," by Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli, is particularly good), it's clear that Jobs was a master of the leadership process. Time and time again, he gathered intelligence about the future of technology; surveyed the competition and refined his taste; set goals and assembled teams; tracked projects, intervening into even apparently trivial decisions; and followed through, considering the minute details of marketing and retail. Although Jobs had considerable charisma, his real edge was his thoughtful involvement in every step of an unusually expansive leadership process. In an almost quantitative sense, he simply led more than others did. (It helped, of course, that he had the right traits: Jobs's interventions worked because he was a genius.)

In theory, even those of us who aren't blessed with charisma can become masters of the leadership process. This is a reassuring idea. Yet the process model has disadvantages, too. If you buy into the trait model, it's relatively easy to choose a leader: you look for a leaderly personality. If you adhere to the process model, the task is harder. It's easy to see Donald Trump's chieftain-like traits—his thundering voice, his fiery mane—but, if it weren't for "The Apprentice," we would know almost nothing about how he conducts his day job. This poses a dilemma. If a leader's traits are unreliable, and her process is inaccessible, how do we decide if she's the right fit?

One way to approach this problem is to think about the system we use to choose our leaders. A few years ago, another Harvard Business School professor, Gautam Mukunda, grew interested in how different organizations fill leadership positions. He noticed that in some organizations the candidate pool is heavily filtered: in the military, for example, everyone who aspires to command must jump through the same set of hoops. In Congress, though, you can vault in as a businessperson, or a veteran, or the scion of a political family. Mukunda hypothesized that, in highly filtered organizations, leaders would end up being relatively interchangeable; in less filtered organizations, individual variation will be greater. By this logic, generals, but not members of Congress, will tend to be more or less equally competent.

In a book called "Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter," from 2012, Mukunda applied this reasoning to the Presidency. He began by giving forty American Presidents a "filtration" score. Gerald Ford was highly filtered (he had spent twenty-four years in "filtering offices," and had been selected as Vice-President in expectation that he would soon be President). George W. Bush was not (he'd spent six years in a "very limited governorship" and depended on his "family connections"). When Mukunda compared those scores with widely accepted rankings of Presidential performance, he found that heavily filtered Presidents clustered around the middle of the rankings, while unfiltered Presidents clustered near both the bottom and the top. Mukunda's theory suggests that, when we select an unfiltered leader, we're taking a big risk; by the same token, there are times when that risk might be worth taking. When things are going badly enough that failure is likely for an average leader, an unfiltered leader—"a man or woman who hasn't been watered down, someone who hasn't been vetted and made the same"—may have a better chance of success. Abraham Lincoln, from Mukunda's perspective, was the ultimate unfiltered President—an outsider during a time of crisis whose decisions differed sharply from the ones his heavily filtered Secretary of State, William Henry Seward, would have made.

If Mukunda is right, you should think about the context in which you find yourself when you choose a leader. The question isn't whether a dark-horse candidate will make a good leader (who can know?) but whether times are bad enough to justify gambling on a dark-horse candidate. Some version of this idea may drive the behavior of outsider candidates. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders don't spend much time talking about their qualifications; instead, they tell us, energetically, that times are very, very bad.

Reading "Indispensable" and other works from the field of leadership studies, you can get the impression that leaders, like authors, have been deconstructed. Leaders used to be titanic and individual; now they're faceless guiders of processes. Once, only the people in charge could lead; now anyone can lead "emergently." The focus has shifted from the small number of people who have been designated as leaders to the background systems that produce and select leaders in the first place.

Leaders, moreover, used to command; now they suggest. Conceptually, at least, leadership and power have been decoupled. In 1927, *Personnel Journal* cited an expert who defined leadership as "the ability to impress the will of the leader on those led and induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation." But after the Second World War the concept of leadership softened. Leaders, it was said, weren't dictators or tyrants; instead of ordering us around, they influenced, motivated, and inspired us. A distinction began to emerge between leadership, which was said to be inspirational, and management, which was seen as more punitive. (As the business books have it, "Managers require, leaders inspire.") The distinction persists today. On diagrams of the leadership process, "punishing disobedient subordinates" rarely appears.

This development has helped make the leadership industry possible, by making the idea of leadership more appealing. The notion that you don't have to be officially powerful to lead has allowed more people to think of themselves as leaders. Leaders, it's said, "elevate," "empower," and "inspire" those around them to do "extraordinary" things. But not everyone is happy with this cheerful vision. In "Leadership BS," a book published last year, Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, identifies five virtues that are almost universally praised by popular leadership writers—modesty, authenticity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and selflessness—and argues that most real-world leaders ignore these virtues. (If anything, they tend to be narcissistic, back-stabbing, self-promoting shape-shifters.) To Pfeffer, the leadership industry is Orwellian. Its cumulative effect is to obscure the degree to which companies are poorly and selfishly run for the benefit of the powerful people in charge. That's why bosses spend billions on leadership seminars: they make corporate life look like "The West Wing," even though, in reality, it's more like "House of Cards."

I've spent some time in a genteel corner of the leadership industry: for several years, I taught a class on political writing, based in the Harvard Kennedy School's department of management, leadership, and decision sciences. The public-policy graduate students I taught spoke incessantly about the kinds of leader they admired and hoped to become. (Many were leaders already: one was a colonel in the Air Force; another was one of South Africa's first black female police chiefs.) Their ideas about leadership were certainly idealistic. But the virtues that they thought of as leaderly—courage, decisiveness, sociability, compassion, trustworthiness, integrity, and so on—matter in ordinary life, too. In our rationalized world, there isn't much space for earnest discussion about virtue; the subject of leadership sometimes creates that space. It's a Trojan horse for a version of moral philosophy. Pfeffer argues that the billions spent on corporate-leadership seminars are a waste of time and money, because they fail to produce better leaders. Yet they may be succeeding as seminars in virtue ethics.

Elizabeth Samet's "Leadership" anthology pursues this line of thinking to its logical conclusion. It sees leadership as a subject for humanists rather than business-school types. Samet is an English professor at West Point who, in a number of books, has written about her experiences teaching literature to cadets. One of her goals, in assembling "Leadership," seems to have been the inclusion of artists, writers, and other unacknowledged legislators of the world. Alongside the usual martial authorities (Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli, Clausewitz), the anthology includes an essay by Virginia Woolf and an interview with Jean Renoir. Often, it slyly critiques the leadership industry. Leaders are frequently urged to be authentic, so Samet includes "Speaking in

Tongues," an essay by Zadie Smith that aims to complicate our notions of authenticity. (Artists, Smith writes, defy a "single identity" and embrace "the many-colored voice, the multiple sensibility.") The section on ambition, "Disciplining Desire," includes only "Macbeth," reproduced in its entirety. (In the study questions, Samet asks, "How are ambitious members of your organization or institution generally regarded?") In her introduction, Samet recalls a lieutenant colonel who asked her to teach a leadership seminar to the officers in his battalion. "It can be subversive, constructive, deconstructive . . . whatever," he said. Evidently, she edited "Leadership" in that spirit.

Reading Samet's anthology, one sees how starkly perspectival leadership is. From the inside, it often feels like a poorly improvised performance; leading is like starring in a lip-synched music video. The trick is to make it look convincing from the outside. And so the anthology takes pains to show how leaders react to the ambiguities of their roles. In one excerpt, from the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, Samet finds him marching toward an enemy camp. Grant, a newly minted colonel who has never commanded in combat, is terrified: "My heart kept getting higher and higher, until it felt to me as though it was in my throat." When the camp comes into view, however, it's deserted—the other commander, Grant surmises, "had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him." Leaders, he realizes, are imagined to be fearless but aren't; ideally, one might hide one's fear while finding in it clues about what the enemy will do.

Other selections explore the idea that leadership is a form of captivity, in which one is both separated from others and exposed to their judgment. In his essay "Shooting an Elephant," George Orwell describes his time as a policeman in colonial Burma: often, he suggests, his decisions were informed by his fear of shame—by the fact that "my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at." Sometimes, it's the people supposedly under one's control who really call the shots. (Trump's campaign pushes this logic to an extreme: it suggests that he'll be a stronger leader for being shameless.)

In the nineteen-eighties, the scholars James Meindl, Sanford Ehrlich, and Janet Dukerich introduced a term for how leadership looks from the outside: "the romance of leadership." Meindl and his colleagues studied this romance in a number of ways. In one study, they asked people to evaluate the performance of a hypothetical company; when they attributed the boost in the company's performance to good leadership, people judged it more valuable than when it was attributed to other, more mundane factors. Another study analyzed mentions of leadership in newspapers: reporters turned out to write more about corporate leadership when companies were doing either very well or very poorly. Leaders, the scholars concluded, are narrative devices. It's through thinking about leadership and leaders that we arrive at "an intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying comprehension of the causes, nature, and consequences of organizational activities. It is the way many prefer to cope and come to grips with the cognitive and moral complexities" of reality. It humanizes the forces that shape history—"forces that are often unknowable and indeterminant, perhaps even objectionable." How else could we make sense of a world that has so many interlocking parts—a world constructed, as Hardy put it, with such "intimate welding"?

To some extent, leaders are storytellers; really, though, they are characters in stories. They play leading roles, but in dramas they can't predict and don't always understand. Because the serialized drama of history is bigger than any one character's arc, leaders can't guarantee our ultimate narrative satisfaction. Because events, on the whole, are more protean than people, leaders grow less satisfying with time, as the stories they're ready to tell diverge from the stories we want to hear. And, because our desire for a coherent vision of the world is bottomless, our hunger for leadership is insatiable, too. Leaders make the world more sensible, but never sensible enough.

Should our leaders keep this in mind? Do we want them to lead with a sense of submerged irony, of wistful self-awareness? When we're swept up in the romance of leadership, we admire leaders who radiate authenticity and authority; we respect and enjoy our "real" leaders. At other times, though, we want leaders who see themselves objectively, who resist the pull of their own charisma, who doubt the story they've been rewarded for telling. "If a man who thinks he is a king is mad," Jacques Lacan wrote, "a king who thinks he is a king is no less so." A sense of perspective may be among the most critical leadership qualities. For better or worse, however, it's the one we ask our leaders to hide. ♦

Joshua Rothman is The New Yorker's archive editor. He is also a frequent contributor to newyorker.com, where he writes about books and ideas. Read more »

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