



# Leaders all

**L**EADERSHIP has been a subject of interest and study for many centuries. This interest stems not only from a fascination with both the structure of leadership and the leaders themselves, but also from a recognition of its importance in the affairs of mankind. It can be argued that early writers, some from outside what emerged as the Western tradition, understood the range of issues that comprise leadership just as well as the moderns and indeed Peter Drucker in his pathbreaking book *The Practice of Management* suggested that there have been no better books on the subject than those Xenophon wrote more than two thousand years ago.

Consider also Lo Szu, the Taoist philosopher writing around 600BC: "As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best the people honour and praise, the next the people fear; and the next the people hate...when the best leader's work is done the people say 'We did it ourselves'. To lead people, walk behind them." There is a subtlety here that escapes much modern literature, and suggests that follower or employee empowerment is the best form of leadership, not something that is popular in large modern corporations.

Moving rapidly forward some 1,500 years, Machiavelli can be seen as the supreme analyst of medieval political leadership, using what was essentially a contingency approach to advocate that the prince – as leader – should use different styles to lead according to the manner by which a territory was acquired. Noteworthy also was his recognition of the necessity for good public relations and publicity to promote lead-

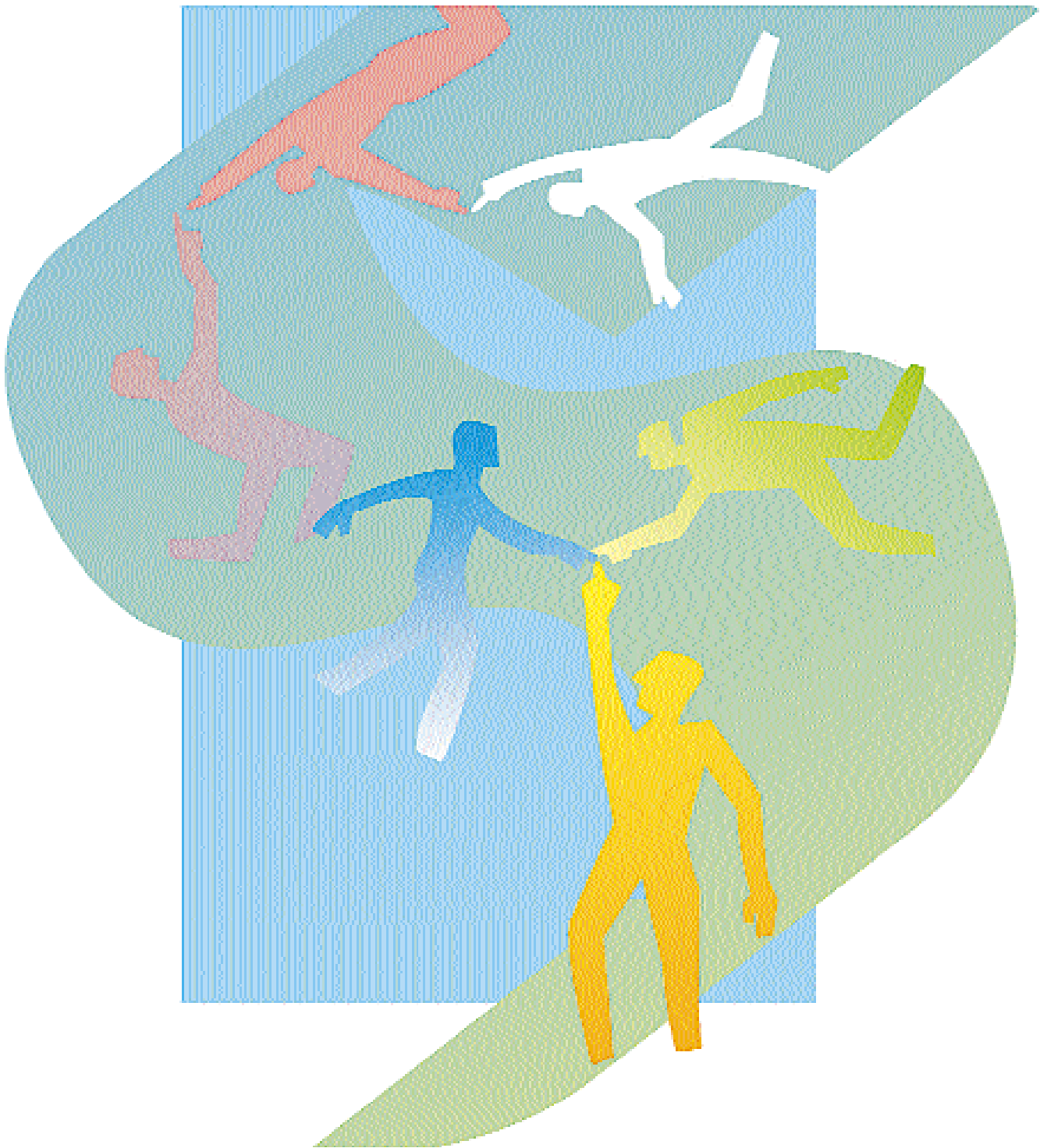
ership, especially charismatic leadership.

Even now, however, there is little agreement about how to define or classify leadership, and it has been a controversial area of study over the century or so of academic analysis. In broad terms, up to World War II, trait theories were dominant, arguing that the inbuilt characteristics of individuals were what made leadership possible. After the War, the main interest was in how leaders behaved, while from the 1960s into the 1980s, the contingency theory became dominant through its interplay between the context, the leaders, and the followers. At present, while there is an even greater interest in leadership, there is no generally accepted approach to leadership, and although later in this article a relatively new approach to leadership will be treated in more detail, it is certainly not claimed that it is, or is even likely, to become dominant.

One issue which should be clarified, however, is the previously controversial difference between leadership and management, where there seems to be an emerging consensus that *leadership is primarily about change* – envisaging, initiating and making change happen, while management is about the organisation and the operation of relatively stable systems and situations.

The most important way to carry out a classification is through understanding the intellectual conception of leadership (which is not the same as 'doing' leadership). The following list of nine approaches illustrates the range of possibilities, and even so, is not comprehensive.

First, leadership can be defined by the personality traits of the leader, usually



together with the assumption that such traits are inborn rather than learned.

Second, there is functional leadership in which the leader tries to define the task and understand both individuals separately and the team and its dynamics. Then there is the 'doing' of leadership, based

on different styles from command and control to motivation or empowerment. An important writer in this area, Yukl, suggests fourteen alternative styles.

A fourth approach balances the need to get the job done, taking account of the feelings and needs of the people involved. Another is the

situational or contingency leadership approach, which holds that style and dimensions of balance hold in the context of different situations, and the leader must use judgement in the choice of leadership required for any one situation.

A sixth approach is based on power – that leaders use different



*Leadership is not something that can be guaranteed to happen. It is something that must be planned for and organised.*

forms of power to get things to happen. This power can be based on formal position, money, reputation, expertise or political skill. A seventh is transactional leadership, which is based on a negotiation of effort for reward, while an eighth is transformational leadership, much loved in the financial markets, which is about having a vision and motivating people to work towards it. Finally, there is the concept that organisations work best through shared ideas, and the role of the leader is to stimulate and facilitate the kind of discussions that enable these shared understandings to be created and thus for people to go ahead together in a coordinated way. This latter is sometimes called dialogical leadership.

How can one choose between all these different approaches? It is difficult to say any of them is right or wrong, but each of them provides a different perspective. Each leader or prospective leader, or organisation trying to decide what sort of leadership it requires would need to consider them in the light of experience and make a judgment. Research carried out by the author in which representatives of some 500 organisations were asked to define what sort of leadership their organisation espoused resulted in a range of such different answers that they were almost impossible to analyse; eventually various clusters of ideas were identified. However none of these clusters reflected anything like a majority perspective. Indeed, the most popular cluster achieved less than a fifth of the total. What this indicates is that there is a very wide range of different views about leadership even in industrial organisations, and in fact they find it quite difficult to articulate what leadership is about even in their own organisation.

In spite of this apparent uncertainty, the British Government's advisory body in this area, The Council for Excellence in

Management and Leadership (CEML), has recommended a series of steps for organisations seeking a coherent position on leadership, which it sees as important for the development of greater efficiency and productivity.

First, it is important to analyse what the existing patterns and practices of leadership are. Then, organisations must make strategic choices about what sort of leadership they would like, including identifying those personal and organisational competences that go to make up leadership in the round. This is followed by a set of activities designed to identify and close the gap between the two, including programmes of personal and group development. Finally, there needs to be a programme of evaluation in order to monitor what has actually transpired and whether the objectives have been achieved. What CEML is saying is, in effect, that leadership is not something that can be guaranteed to happen; rather it is something that must be planned for and organised. It possibly goes without saying that this set of steps must be initiated and led by the very top of the organisation; they are not something that can be handed over to the human resources function to look after.

In the last section of this article, we now introduce a particular approach to leadership, one that appears to be gaining recognition and credibility – 'distributed' leadership.

'Distributed' leadership involves the sharing or diffusion of leadership functions within an organisation. The term is one that has been used occasionally throughout literature without coalescing into a school of thought until recently, and even now there are differing usages and meanings to some of the terms associated with it. Nevertheless, there are perhaps five main precepts:

- That leadership functions and



**A.P.J. Abdul Kalam**

**Presidential candidate, Bharat Ratna A.P.J. Abdul Kalam is a former Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India and is considered the 'father' of India's missile programme.**

A quality leader should be a person with a vision and should be brave enough to support change. The traditional role of leader as a commander has to change to that of a coach. Instead of being a director, a leader should delegate; and instead of being a manager, he should be a mentor.

For me, a leader means, above all a person who, instead of demanding respect, facilitates self-respect. This kind of leadership I have seen in the space, defence and technology departments of the Government.

As an example of great leadership I can think of no better person than Prof. Satish Dhawan, the former Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). In 1979, when the first flight of the satellite launch vehicle (SLV) project failed and the vehicle plunged into the Bay of Bengal, I was the mission director.

But instead of me getting the blame, to my surprise, I found Prof. Dhawan, as Chairman of ISRO, taking all responsibility for the failure. The very next year, when the launch succeeded, the true leader that Prof. Dhawan was, he gave full credit to my team and me.

Great leadership is this: a person absorbing all failures, but sharing successes with others.

*(As told to M. Somasekhar)*

power may be shared and are not the prerogative of any one person or elite group.

- That the potential for leading is widely held, and with suitable training and support can be developed in individuals.
- That individuals, groups and organisations are more effective when leadership is distributed or shared.
- That leadership is a process, not just a set of individual characteristics.
- That leadership is organisation-centred or at least group-centred rather than person-centred, as most previous literature has assumed.

All this is not to say that the type of leadership throughout an organisation is the same. Indeed it is not. And it is central to the understanding of distributed leadership to recognise that there are at least three different, but complementary types of leadership, and each of the three types involves different roles, mindsets and time scales. Thus, there is a need for visionary leadership at the top level, to provide the broad framework of strategy and values within which the organisation can move forward and satisfy the various stakeholders. This requires not just an organisational mindset, but one encompassing industry-wide and probably inter-

national perspectives as well in order to anticipate, respond to and help shape the external environment. Such a mindset should also have a long time scale.

At the unit level there is a need for integrative leadership, taking the corporate vision, values and strategy and making it operational within the unit and in relation to possible conflicting interests as between contiguous units, and also interpreting it according to the needs of the particular context of the unit. This level of leadership will additionally require the development of appropriate systems and processes for operational needs. Here, the timescale and mindset



*Empowering people is a big step towards encouraging them to display their leadership potential.*

are more constrained, but still have some reach beyond the present and the unit itself.

Then at the team or project level there is the need for fulfilment leadership, required for getting the project or the operating results achieved with the requisite quality and efficiency. Here, the time scale is short-term and the mindset not much beyond the project, with an orientation towards results and pleasing the customer or client. Leadership can be manifested by increasing efficiency, making incremental rather than major changes and by unlocking the potential in the individuals in the team or group.

Each of the three types of leadership requires rather different competences, although it may well be that the higher-level leadership skills subsume some of the lower ones. (It might also be that what is a positive attribute at one level, such as attention to detail in task fulfilment, can be a disadvantage at another, in distracting from pursuing a broader vision.) In addition to this framework of competences, the context may require rather different skills. Thus, leading in a marketing position may require different skills from those in a production position. And even within any leadership role, there will be different situations, which require different leadership styles. Some may demand a quick decision, imposed in a command and control manner, while others will be better served by a more consultative style of leadership. It is thus possible to think of a matrix of level, context, and situation, which can create a wide variety of potential leadership responses, but all under the broad umbrella of distributed leadership. Finally, distributed leadership requires a strong communications system through which leaders at all levels can inter-relate; without some means of integration, different leaders could act in an isolated and ulti-

mately dysfunctional manner. The key to successful distributed leadership is the complementarity between the different levels and leaders – each level has a certain degree of authority and the authority permits discretion for each leader within the overall strategy. If there were no discretion there could be no leadership.

It must not be assumed that a distributed leadership system is easy to install and operate, or that there is a single pattern that can suit most organisations. Making the decision to move to the framework required by distributed leadership is itself a major one for an organisation. Simple issues of organisational life can conspire against its success, such as the nature and pressures of power. Power can be double-edged; it can be a constraint when it is used by individuals to pursue their own agendas through organisational politics. But if power can be shared with others, empowering them, this is a big step forward in encouraging them to display their leadership potential. Another problematic dimension is the amount of change and development that is required at both individual and organisational levels, and the leadership required to achieve the transition. In short, implementing distributed leadership is more of a long-term journey than a quick fix.

Debates about the nature of leadership will doubtless continue as long as human society, but this point in time seems to be one when the issues have been sharpened by the rate of change, and when they are therefore more keenly discussed than in more tranquil times. In such a context the distribution of leadership seems an appropriate way forward. ■

*(The author is a Professor at the Open University Business School in the UK, and was also its first Dean.)*