

Resource for

Chapter 3: Thought Followership

This essay presents an extended account of the argument in Chapter 3 of The Leadership Mind.

While it is intended to complement and supplement the chapter in the book, which of necessity had to be a brief statement, it can also be read as a stand-alone essay.

In Chapter 2 we establish that there is a crisis in the thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations due to the multitude of conflicting definitions of the fundamental idea of 'leadership'. This is an unacceptable situation for practitioners in business, and yet shows no sign of being resolved. Our purpose in The Leadership Mind is to attempt a resolution of this problem by formulating a basic, workable, and sustainable concept of 'leadership' for business.

To do this, we had to do some necessary ground-clearing operations to create room for thinking afresh about 'leadership' in business organisations. One of these was to answer the question: what allows the state of confusion to be perpetuated? This was dealt with in Chapter 2 by establishing that a long-standing logical error in thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations provided the space in which the confusion can be perpetuated.

The next question that naturally arises is: what sustains and perpetuates the state of confusion?

■ WHY AND HOW CONFUSION PERSISTS ABOUT 'LEADERSHIP' IN BUSINESS THINKING

Even the most cursory examination of the vast literature surrounding 'leadership' will reveal an aspect that would not be tolerated in any other field of thinking: the lack of a clear definition of the term itself. Instead, the field is littered with a huge number of competing definitions vying for dominance. Joseph Rost in his *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*

(1991), for instance, identifies **221** definitions put forward between 1890 and 1990.¹

As far back as 1959, Walter Bennis wrote:

*Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. And, ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences. Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it: leadership, power, status, authority, rank, prestige, influence, control, manipulation, domination, and so forth, and still the concept is not sufficiently defined."*²

while in 2010 Keith Grint commented...

despite almost three thousand years of ponderings and over a century of 'academic' research into leadership we appear to be no nearer a consensus as to its basic meaning, let alone whether it can be taught or its effects measured and predicted. This cannot be because of a dearth of interest or material: on 29th October 2003 there were 14,139 books relating to leadership on Amazon.co.uk... Just over six years later that number had almost quadrupled to 53,121 ... You would be forgiven for thinking that more information equates to a greater understanding. Unfortunately, we just seem to generate ever-greater disparity in our understandings and seem no nearer 'the truth' about defining leadership than before we began to publish so much material.³

Sorting out what 'leadership' means is not just something for researchers to argue about. The prac-

tical impact is a troublesome situation facing senior managers, directors, and other people expected to be 'leaders' and to provide 'leadership'. Too often they are expected to do so in some *unspecified* sense. A quick look at executive job ads makes this clear: an EU marketing director 'must have proven leadership capabilities with a dynamic leadership style', and a head of human resources in a tourism organisation must have 'strong leadership skills', skills which are also demanded of anyone applying to become the manager of a local leisure facility. None of them ever state, however, what they mean by 'leadership'. Also, areas outside the borders of commerce demand the same, and it is quite usual to see ads for third-level headship positions stressing the need for 'leadership'.⁴

The outcome can be that when performance of putative 'leadership' is assessed by short-term external factors, such as changes in stock market valuations, there is a disconnection between what is possible and what is demanded. It is not surprising therefore that people who have the expectation of 'leadership' placed on their shoulders can often feel in over their heads, leading to an anxiety that takes a personal toll. Such 'leadership anxiety' can result in unplanned costs for organisations. Often significant, they arise in the form of lack of confidence, protective arrogance, domineering behaviour, micro-managing, bullying, and other authoritarian styles, and result in suppressing creativity, flexibility, innovation, risk-taking, and initiative.

In *The Leadership Mind* we propose a concept of 'leadership' that we believe is a workable and sustainable concept. In working towards a formulation of that concept, it became clear that it would first be necessary to clear the ground, so to speak, to give us the space to think anew without falling into the sort of thinking that caused the confusion in the first place. A big part of that preliminary work was to address a specific question that arose naturally from the state of thinking in the field: *how has the confusion resulting from the lack of a clear definition of 'leadership' continued for so long?* That is the task we have set ourselves in this essay. Only by answering the question can we begin to identify what is going wrong in current thinking about 'leadership' in business.

We propose as our answer the working hypothesis that the reason the field of 'leadership' has remained in a state of confusion for so long is directly a result of

what we call the 'thought-leadership-thought-follower-ship' business and the dominance and pervasiveness in the field of business thinking, including thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations, of its particular marketing model.

In attempting to persuade you of the validity of this hypothesis, we do not rely on the assertive mode of argument as is common in this area. Instead, our argument will be made up of a 'thought-train', starting from the factual observation that the state of thinking about 'leadership' is in disarray. In this process, we will utilise deductive methods as appropriate in our style of argumentative reasoning. Success in this task will depend on whether you are persuaded by our argument. There is no rule or formula for deciding whether we are right or wrong; it is a matter of judging for yourself. It will come down to your personal standards for judging if an argument, a 'thought train', is good enough for you. The only thing we can ask of you is that this judgement comes from an openness to change, not rejection before investigation. We are in effect asking you to think actively with us and, on the basis of *that* experience, to come to your final assessment.

■ 'THOUGHT LEADERSHIP-FOLLOWERSHIP' AS A BUSINESS

An old business joke tells of a merchant who liked to wheel and deal in all types of products. On one occasion he sells a consignment of tinned beans to a fellow businessman who comes back the following day and complains that they tasted awful. "But those beans weren't for eating," the merchant protests, "they were for buying and selling!"

As trivial as it is, the story is a good allegory of a dominant tendency in business thinking today, which is in essence *a business model* in which ideas, whatever their intrinsic value, are not for thinking with but are primarily products to be packaged and sold as *content* in myriad different products, from magazine articles and books to YouTube videos and podcasts. Ideas are not approached as *ideas* to be understood, questioned and used as tools of thought. This is what we call the business of thought-leadership-followership.

What do we mean by *thought leadership and followership*?

Each discipline has its rollcall of pioneers who have helped shape the world in which we live. In the field of business thinking, for instance, one

thinks of Peter Drucker as a pre-eminent thinker in the field of management and business organisation and the contributions he made to the theory and practise of modern management. Such a thinker can deservedly be called a 'thought leader' (though he never styled himself as such) and his work has earned many 'followers' who continue to explore and use his thinking on business to develop their own thinking. In this sense, Drucker's 'followers' are thinking for themselves. Most of all, Drucker's relationship with those who came under his influence did not determine the ideas he formed; he was not interested in merely giving them what they wanted to hear.

This is in stark contrast to the self-styled 'thought leaders' who offer ideas that are shaped and packaged according to their customers' tastes, so that their customers *do* get what they want to hear. By marketing themselves *as a brand*, so-called 'thought leaders' are able to build a customer base who they perceive as being their "thought 'followers'".

While there are many types of self-styled 'thought leaders' contributing to perpetuating the confusion about 'leadership', some of whom we will come to later, for our purposes we will first focus on an example that merits the reader's time and attention, one with substance and credibility, to show that, even at its best, 'thought-leadership' must always be weighed carefully and, in our view, considered as the main source of the problem.

■ A KEY 'THOUGHT-LEADER'

There are many consulting firms and educational establishments engaged in the business of 'thought-leadership', with some issuing regular bulletins of 'leading ideas' and 'latest developments'. Many of these publications are excellent, containing insightful analyses of current issues, but it must be borne in mind that their main aim is to promote the services they are offering to companies – a factor that has some bearing on their content.⁵

Of all of these, the one that stands out by far is the *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*), published by Harvard Business Publishing, an extension of the prestigious Harvard Business School in Boston. The influence of the *HBR* in the intensely competitive market for executive education is enormous, especially in the field of most immediate interest to us, that of 'leadership'. This standing is a due both to the huge cachet that the *HBR* brand has built up over the decades

and to the way that it has leveraged that cachet to become a 'thought leader' with an unquestioning band of followers. Consequently, we suggest that its contribution to the stagnation of thinking that surrounds the issue of 'leadership' has been considerable. In what follows, we examine that charge in more detail, looking at how the *HBR* has evolved, how its editorial approach has helped to shape it as a dominant influence in business thinking, and how it is fully aware of how it plays that role. Finally, by providing a critique of a representative article on 'leadership' from the *HBR*, we will show how its role distorts and constricts its thinking.

Since it was founded in 1922, the *HBR* has undergone several twists and turns (including even a boardroom sex scandal) before settling into its current shape. One view is that it was at its height in editorial terms in the 1970s and early 1980s under Kenneth Andrews, who saw the magazine as an extension of the School itself, bringing its expertise to those who could not attend and 'serving as a translator of important research for consumption by actual practitioners.'⁶ Andrews expected his editors to become deeply involved with the material they were handling, but from the early 1990s this became less important when editors, many of them recruited from *Time* magazine, were 'tasked with spiffing up copy'⁷ to make it more 'accessible'. This trend culminated in 2009, when the *HBR* entered a new phase of its history with the appointment of Adi Ignatius, a former *Time* and *Wall Street Journal* writer, as editor-in-chief. As well as bringing the policy of 'accessibility' to a new level, he has guided the expansion of the *HBR* brand into the digital universe to the extent that the journal, with a print subscription of about 263,000 and now issued six times a year instead of ten, is progressively becoming the flagship rather than the heavy hitter for the whole operation.⁸ It has more than thirteen million followers on LinkedIn, nearly six million on Facebook, and more subscribers to its YouTube channel than they do to the magazine. Its most recent venture has been on the TikTok platform, an adjunct to its popular YouTube channel, where the aim is to attract young people on the threshold of their careers into its community of followers. All these platforms, of course, have an important marketing function, which is to act as signposts to *HBR's* main online presence at www.hbr.org, which offers a tiered subscription plan for access to the

website and/or the printed version of the magazine and spin-off publications.

When the *HBR* was just a physical product, its potential to grow was limited. Because the readership was consequently more or less static, the possibility of expanding it did not shape the editorial thinking of the journal. The digital revolution, however, provided new and less costly ways of packaging content and distributing it to a much wider audience. By harnessing the power of social media platforms, that audience could be expanded to a magnitude unthinkable just a few decades previously. The audience consequently became a growing beast that had to be constantly fed, and ‘thought followership’ became the driving force. The ideas ‘business’, where the task is to break new ground in thinking, thus became distorted into the ‘business of ideas’, where a marketing outlook dominates – not just in selling content but in developing content deemed acceptable by the market (a strategy employed by newspapers, for instance, where there is often a greater reliance on market research than editorial judgment, but not expected of a journal that purports to have a certain gravitas and make a real difference to the thinking life of its readers).

An examination of the *HBR*’s approach to how it presents its material in print and online is revealing. The magazine sees its audience as “smart and sceptical and busy” who require “writing that’s *persuasive* and a pleasure to read” because, if “their interest is [not captured] right away, *they will move on to something else*”.⁹ That statement above all exposes the *HBR*’s Achilles’ heel. It is not asking its readers to *stop* and think about what they are reading but seeks to have them flit butterfly-like on to the next offering. What does that say about the ideas it puts forward every month? Are they to be held onto, or are they merely to be consumed and then thrown onto the rubbish-tip of forgotten ideas?

HBR’s failure to challenge its readers and provoke them towards serious thinking is a result of the cornerstone of its editorial approach: *accessibility*. This is understandably appealing to executives faced with overload and looking for everything to be reduced to a simple process – ‘here are the four steps to be a great X’.

Authors submitting to *HBR* must accept a template imposing an ‘easy-read’ format, which can be described as ‘potting’ the content for easy digestion.¹⁰

Most noticeably, this template does not support writers who would like to make coherent arguments based on logic and evidence, and neither is it interested in properly citing and referencing (although further details may sometimes be given in online versions). It is a business about ‘presentation’. Thus, the editors ‘retain final decision rights over headlines’ as, according to the publication’s own ‘Guidelines for Contributors’, they

. . . have spent years learning *which kinds of headlines give HBR pieces the best chance of being read, found online, and shared* both on social media and in offices around the world. If we rewrite your title, it’s because we believe the revised version will help your idea reach the audience it deserves.¹¹

It also says it “collaborates with authors to express their thoughts”, and while such collaboration may seem benign, its real effect can be to shoehorn what it receives into a standardised template that has more to do with marketing *HBR* products than with serious research.

No matter how complex an issue may be, therefore, it must be delivered in standardised ‘bite-size chunks’ (and even more so in its digital outlets). Short-attention spans are promoted by this style of presentation and, in a vicious circle, are reinforced by implicitly conveying that any important ideas, no matter how complex, can always be so treated. In effect, it treats thinking and knowledge as being about “downloading *information*”. The familiar and comfortable – the place one is already at – is carried over to the *new* idea and the latest trend so that settled patterns of thinking are never upset. It starts with us at ‘home’ and in the end leaves us at ‘home’. We stay where we are in how we think because the ‘authority to which we defer’ – the ‘thought leader’ – not only allows us but encourages us to do so. As it does that, its business model of building and sustaining a ‘followership’ survives.

It is important to remember also that even though the conscious mind may not be (ostensibly) engaged in serious thinking, the subconscious mind is still working away in the background. As a result, even if something like the *HBR* is being taken in only superficially, what psychologists call the ‘familiarity effect’ comes into play, whereby things ‘we know’ are reinforced. The *HBR* doesn’t require opening our minds to exploration and thoughtfulness; the

aim seems to be to never allow settled patterns to be upset. The subliminal impacts of this way of ‘reading’ – without giving any serious thought to what we are being told or being challenged by it – can serve only to maintain what Robert Kegan calls a ‘socialising mind’.¹² This is not a truly independent way of thinking but rather one where there is active deferring to external authorities, such as the *HBR*, doing our thinking for us. One should note Peter Drucker’s observation, that “The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t said.”¹³ In other words, active reading of the *HBR* will reveal its aim to keep readers operating as socialising minds.

The *HBR* wants to keep its audience at the socialised mind level, with readers deferring to it as *the external authority*, while purporting to develop thinking. That is why frameworks and checklists, not arguments as properly understood, loom large in its approach. The customers, therefore, are the driving force with the result that the business model has become one of ‘thought followership’ and not in fact ‘thought leadership’ in any meaningful sense. Overall, the *HBR* treats the reader as someone who is willing to be told *what to think* – to be their ‘thought follower’ of what they offer as the latest big idea.

■ **HBR’S AWARENESS THAT IT IS ABOUT CREATING ‘THOUGHT FOLLOWERS’**

Those overseeing the *HBR* are clearly aware that the publication in all its manifestations is driven by the need to create and sustain a customer base of ‘thought followers’, and the way to do this is through a *thought-followership* marketing model which drives the whole undertaking, thus asking the reader to accept its assertions and points of view as *the external authority*.

In an interview about his role as editor-in-chief, Adi Ignatius reckoned that the *HBR* had offered him the position in 2009 because they were looking for “somebody with a metabolism more like mine – somebody who had experience working for a daily and a weekly and who liked the idea of *figuring out what readers prefer now*.”¹⁴ He was determined that the magazine would become, in his words, ‘audience-centric’, in which contributors would cater for the needs of its readers – or at least the needs of readers as perceived by its editors. At one point, tellingly they contemplated the idea of splitting the brand into two – “a magazine with serious articles and

a digital publication that was more frivolous or less considered” – but decided instead that the approach to content would be the same across the board.

An article in the *HBR* in November 2012 echoes that ‘audience-centric’ policy and again demonstrates the policy of creating a customer base through ‘thought followership’. ‘The Guru’s Guide to Creating Thought Leadership’ by H. James Wilson offers itself as a guide “for anyone – from bloggers, to academics, to strategy consultants – looking to produce world-class thought leadership”. The author examines four key areas to consider in the quest to become a thought leader, based on his observations of those ‘gurus’ who have received the *HBR* seal of approval.

The article asks: are your ideas, for instance, in sync with the zeitgeist – ‘the complex interplay of economic, technological, political, and social forces that can determine which ideas will flop and which will fly’? Do your ideas address the core issues for business as determined by those forces? Have you thought of taking an old, trusted idea and dressing it up by sprinkling in ‘new case examples that align with the current zeitgeist’? Finally, are you ‘staying ahead of the curve’ by writing about ideas before they become mature and offer little opportunity for becoming a thought leader?

In the author’s mind, therefore, what ‘thought leaders’ create are not ideas that can be judged as ideas but as products whose value is to be weighed in terms of their marketability.

This article illustrates the growing sub-genre of business literature in print and online that provides instructions on how anyone can become a ‘thought leader’. This approach, however, paradoxically makes of so-called ‘thought leaders’ nothing more than ‘thought followers’. This pivoting from ‘thought leadership’ to ‘thought followership’ is revealed in sharp relief by the example of the practical advice on how to become a thought leader given by a frequent *HBR* contributor Dorie Clark in an interview in the *HBR* IdeaCast podcast series. She was speaking about her book *Stand Out*, which is tellingly subtitled “How to Find Your Breakthrough Idea and Build a Following Around It”.¹⁵ According to the book’s blurb, the author ‘teaches readers how to develop a big idea, leverage existing affiliations, and build a community of followers.’

A philosophy expounded

This interview with Clark, conducted by Sarah Green

Carmichael, provides as clear a statement one will get of what is meant by a ‘thought-leader’ – essentially a marketer of some product or service who uses *ideas-as-content* as an element in delivering their business function *and/or* is a product or service innovator.

In the following detailed account of the interview, we have structured the sequence and inserted guiding labels (in upper-case italics) and occasional observations to help bring out the points we want to make.

OPENING – The interviewer opens the conversation by saying that she considers the author’s defense of the term ‘thought leader’ at the beginning of the book to be “icky”, adding: “I don’t know if I want someone to lead my thoughts.” Why we can’t just say ‘expert’, she asks.

TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITION – Clark responds that “... it is very icky when people call themselves thought leaders because that sounds a little bit egomaniacal ... thought leadership is something that is *worthy to be aspired to* because I actually like *the precision of the definition*...Being an *expert* is great ...But I don’t think it’s sufficient anymore.”

She then ‘parses’ the term into its ‘constituent parts’: “...so number one, thought, right? It means you are *being known and recognized for your ideas*. It means you have that *expertise*.” She considers the ‘leader’ part to be the essential one: “There are far too many people who are in their ivory tower, they have great ideas. But they don’t do anything to *share them* with the world. And anytime you have a good idea that’s locked up in the attic, it’s *not doing you any good*. It’s not doing society good.”

Clark then justifies their use of the label ‘thought-leader’: “I want to see *people who are out there and active and engaged and making a difference with their ideas*. That’s how we get real change. And so *aspiring to be a thought leader*, somebody who has great ideas that he or she shares with the world, I think is actually a pretty noble endeavor.”

‘BUILDING’ ONESELF AS ‘THOUGHT-LEADER’ – Referring to “people out there who will sort of claim the title, whether or not they really have earned it”, the interviewer asks: “... how do you know if you have really developed enough expertise to have that kind of influence? How do you know that you’re really talking about something that you do know a lot about and not just kind of pontificating about something that maybe you have strong opinions

about but not enough expertise to really own?”

Clark: “I actually describe [in my book] a three-step process to *building a following around your ideas, to becoming the leader part of the equation*. And basically, it goes like this. It’s first *building your network*, next *building your audience*, and then finally *building your community*.”

She confirms, in effect, the marketing and promotions sense conveyed by these terms when explaining each of these elements and the process involved and, in concluding, defines ‘success’: “It’s not just you talking about things anymore. It’s [people in your community] talking to each other. And *they become ambassadors for your idea because they believe in it too*. And that’s *when you really have success* and when your ideas can spread.”

PROTECTING IP – The interviewer, picking up on the point about other people sharing the idea, says: “. . .I think, [what] a lot of people worry about is getting credit for being the one who came up with the idea. Is that something people should care about? Should they care about getting credit for the idea? Or should they just care that people want to spread the idea?”

Clark gives two answers. The first is that obsession with protecting intellectual property stymies the spread of the idea: “...*you can’t be paranoid about other people stealing your ideas*”. She then continues to the second answer: “[What] I have found in my research is that the very best way to ensure both *your ideas spread and that you get credit for it* is just going out there and *communicating about your idea, creating content around your idea* as much as you possibly can. Because then you don’t have to worry about it. The world is going to police it for you.”

GENERATING IDEAS – The interviewer introduces the idea of “combining of disparate fields into a new perspective.... Because there might be a lot of experts out there in particular fields already, so maybe you don’t want to compete directly with them. But you might be someone who can combine these disparate fields into being an expert in a cool, little niche. Could you say a little bit more about that?”

Clark: “Yeah, absolutely. So one of the longstanding tenets of creativity research, actually, is about combining two things that really don’t make sense together. So I mean, if I was going to be *designing a new washing machine*, maybe the inspiration would be, OK, let’s see. How can I apply the concepts of

ballet to *designing my new washing machine?*”

“And then it’s like, oh, well, OK, this suggests all these interesting things. Maybe how can I make my *washing machine* more graceful? Or how can I make it lighter on its feet or whatever? And so creativity researchers have been talking about this for a long time.”¹⁶

She gives what would be considered a plausible example in the field of science:

EXAMPLE OF ‘THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP’ (1): The example of combining ideas from the various fields cited is that of a medical scientist who combined training in mathematics, computation, and biology to develop techniques for profiling disease in populations.

She then continues “...actually when it comes to thought leadership, when it comes to *developing your own ideas*, we can apply some of these same principles in our own professional lives” and then talks about people drawing on their different life experiences to “...see the world differently than other people. And that’s what can *enable you to really just capitalize on that* if you think about it the right way.”

Having given a plausible example, she begins to revert to the ‘thought leadership’-as-business way of thinking by reaching for marketing as the way to approach ideas.

‘THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP’ IS A COMPETITIVE MATTER – The interviewer suggests that coming up with “creative new ideas” is also “finding a way to differentiate yourself” and, by combining ideas, “you’re sort of in a new field where maybe there’s not as much competition”.

Clark: “Yeah, that’s exactly right, [*i.e.*, not as much *competition*]. It enables you to *create a niche of one*, and so *you can really own it*”, and they continue, giving the author Tim Ferris as an illustration of this.

EXAMPLE OF ‘THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP’ (2) – Clark proceeds to cite the example of author Tim Ferris as an illustration of ‘owning’ a segment of the market. Ferris, she explains, was the author of *The 4-Hour Work Week* for the business market and then extended the ‘4-Hour’ brand to *The 4-Hour Body* for the fitness market and *The 4-Hour Chef* for the cookery market. “And then it’s like, oh, whoa, he’s *created this new category*, and he’s able to be the *expert*. He’s able to be the *best at it*. And it cuts through the swath of everything that he’s interested in, and it suddenly *makes sense as a brand*.”

ANYONE CAN BE A ‘THOUGHT-LEADER’ – Interviewer: “What if you’re not really an expert in enough things, one or two or three things, to really be a thought leader in any of those categories, but you’re really just more of a generalist?”

In responding, Clark on the surface would appear to be moving towards active thinking:

Well, I think, first of all, this is something I’ve encountered. I mean, I like to think of myself as a Renaissance person, but I like to do a lot of different things. It was very hard for me to think about taking *narrow areas of specialization*. I mean, some people are so passionate about a given topic, of course it’s self-evident they want to specialize in that. They want to dive down into it.

But for a different type of person, which I class myself as being, you want to do a little of everything. It’s just kind of how we’re wired. But actually, it turns out that is OK. And what I discovered from my research for *Stand Out* is that a lot of the best ideas – I think that there’s a *myth about how breakthrough ideas are developed*. People oftentimes think that it is just some bolt from the heavens that, oh, they had this idea, and then they go and execute it.

The truth is, most people don’t magically have an idea and execute it. What happens is they *find an area that they’re interested in*. They *immerse themselves* in that. They roll up their sleeves. They start mucking around and doing things in that area. And it is through the *process of engaging with it* that they discover what questions they want to solve, first of all, and then what the answer to that question might be.

You don’t know enough going in. Almost no one knows enough going in to be able to predict not just the answer, but even the question. But it’s *through doing that you can find out find it*. So I think a lot of people disqualify themselves up front because they say, oh, I just don’t have any ideas, or I don’t know enough about it. But if you dive in, more often than not you will actually be able to *find it through the act of making it happen*.

Even a brief analysis of the above will reveal a misunderstanding of the ideas ‘business’, which is revealed in the next topic to which the interview about ‘thought leadership’ turns.

BEING A ‘THOUGHT-LEADER’ IS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT SECURITY – The Interviewer refers to people being hesitant to dive in, nervous about not having

enough to say, worried about sticking their necks out on their topic and asks: “What do you say about that sort of reticence to have that kind of public voice.”

Clark: “So I think that it’s important to note that there’s different gradations, right? We’re *not saying to everybody, you must be some celebrity*. You need to write a book. You need to go give a lecture tour. What I am *saying, however to everybody*, which I really do believe, is that it is increasingly important in our economy, in our society, for *every professional* to have some *expertise that they are recognized for*. This is the *ultimate form of career insurance* that you need to have.”

Clark then takes “the worst-case scenario”:

If your company hits hard times, if the economy hits some bumps and there are layoffs that need to happen, who’s going to get laid off? Well, the last people that would get laid off would be the folks who have a really strong *brand*, who are known for something. Because they’re the ones that when people are tallying up the list, they’ll say, oh, we can’t afford to lose him. He’s so good at XYZ. How will we do without someone with that aptitude?

But if you don’t have a strong *brand*, if people honestly don’t really know what you’re good at or what you’re good for around the office, then they’ll say, well, I mean, she’s a nice person, but I guess if we have to make a tough choice we can let her go. So you need to show people why you’re valuable.¹⁷

‘THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP’ IS ALSO ABOUT CAREER ADVANCEMENT – Continuing with this theme, Clark adds that being a ‘thought-leader’ is not just a defensive move,

...it is also a *proactive move*. Because when you *demonstrate your talents and expertise*, it makes it far more likely that people are going to think of you. You’re going to be the first person that comes to mind when there are great opportunities that you would be hungry for – that promotion, that opportunity to be on a really great project, that overseas assignment. *You want to be at the top of the list*.

THE REVELATION – The interviewer, saying that a “really good case” has been made for “why we should become thought leaders”, then asks: “Is [coming up with a new turn of phrase, a new coinage or catch phrase, almost a slogan for an idea] really necessary or useful when you’re trying to get traction for an idea [as so many people, when they are on this path, seem to think]?”

Clark talks about the variety of activities she is currently engaged in and refers to the early days of her business when she was just a *marketing consultant* and working with clients doing *marketing plans*. It would drive her nuts, she says, when people would say ‘what we really need is a slogan’ because that is “the tip of the iceberg...It’s the uneducated person’s version of what *marketing* is. And I don’t mean uneducated like unschooled. I mean, somebody who just doesn’t get *marketing*.” She continues:

Because when they think *marketing*, oh, we need our own “Just Do It”. And the truth is, yes, it’s a marvelous slogan. It’s wonderful. But your insurance agency does not need a ‘Just Do It’ or whatever it is. What you need is to understand fundamentally who you are, to understand who you are vis-a-vis *your competitors and your customers* and how those pieces fit together ...

...I think there are a lot of things that are much more important than just the slogan. I think that when it comes to some kind of breakthrough idea or whatever, the truth is it doesn’t have to be Newtonian. It doesn’t have to be some Einstein idea.

People get held up sometimes because they think, oh, I need to develop something so different the world has never seen it. But when I’m talking about an *idea that can really make a difference for your company or for your career*, it’s something that is a *breakthrough* because it *moves the ball forward*. It *advances things* in some powerful way. But it doesn’t have to be earth-shattering.

She further explains:

...as individuals or for our companies, as we’re thinking about *developing breakthrough ideas*, it’s *not that you have to come up with something that the world has never seen before*. It’s certainly not that you have to come up with some catchy slogan, and that’s going to solve all your problems.

It is really about understanding in a very thorough way who you are in the world, *what you want to express*, and *how you can give the best of yourself to your customers or the people around you*, and when you figure that out, the slogans solve themselves. It’s about *finding more ways to be helpful*.

That, in essence, we suggest is the marketing function in business. Clark then turns to another example to illustrate her thinking about the ‘thought-leader’.

EXAMPLE OF ‘THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP’ (3) – Howard Schultz, the founder of the Starbucks brand of

coffee shops, is given by Clark as her “favorite example” of what she is talking about, and the process involved in being a ‘thought-leader’:

This is a guy who *did not invent coffee*. He *did not invent coffee shops*. He *invented a different way to organise a coffee shop*, a ‘third place’. And I’m also willing to bet that the ‘third place’ tag line was not the first thing that he came up with.

I mean this is *something he had to iterate and evolve*. When he first brought the Starbucks concept to America, he made it too Italian. It was not quite right. He had to keep tweaking it. But *he eventually found the balance*.

We believe that the above is sufficient to show that the *HBR* is consciously pursuing and implementing a ‘thought-followership’ business model. This approach shapes its treatment of the issue of leadership in business organisations. To show this, we drill deeper into a representative *HBR* article to show how the editorial policy works out in practice.

■ A REPRESENTATIVE *HBR* ARTICLE ANALYSED

The article we have chosen to examine is ‘Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?’ by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones, which was originally published by the *HBR* in 2000.¹⁸ The main reason for choosing this above other equally representative articles is because it is well-known, having been republished on several occasions and in different formats and editions.¹⁹ We must also add that it has much to commend it, including observations arising from the authors’ work with their clients. The *HBR* has also underlined its view of the article as a significant one in the field of ‘leadership’ by including it in the first volume of its flagship publication, *10 Must Reads on Leadership*. (Incidentally, the ‘Must’ in the title, and in the titles of other ‘10 Must Reads’ on different areas of executive education, says much about the *HBR*’s assertive, self-assured style: here is what you need to know, and all you need to know, to be successful as a business executive.)

Since undertaking a critique of the Goffee and Jones article will necessarily involve us in the art of criticism, we must by way of orientation pay attention to the nature, structure, and role of criticism, as the word has been so bowdlerised that it is associated with being a negative rather than a positive act.

There are two aspects to criticism: commentary and critique. The first is the *commentary* undertaken to establish the material content or subject matter

of something that is to be subjected to critique. The second is a *critique* which is the search for the meanings and truths of the subject matter. Properly understood, criticism is therefore a positive function. It serves to create a space for thinking and to free up thinking by bringing release from limiting assumptions.

Criticism also requires a closer reading that would not normally be undertaken by many readers, who may not have the time and opportunity to conduct such analysis. We are privileged that our work provides us with the time and opportunity while also imposing the responsibility to do so carefully. We would also recommend that readers would undertake their own check of the analysis by consulting not just the original example but also, ideally, a sample of many others in the same vein to satisfy their own standards of judgment by direct experience.

This is important because there can be no logical proof for the kind of argument being made here as, indeed is the case with our sample article and those like it. If, however, there is agreement with our argument, then the main implication we must also accept is that a different approach to thinking must be taken: that we must think differently to the conventional way of thinking about ‘leadership’ in business organisations. Hence, it is up to each of us to make up our own minds as to whether the hypothesis being advanced is, at least, a crucial part of the explanation for the perpetuation of the unsatisfactory state of the field of ‘leadership’.

A typical *HBR* ‘argument’ about ‘leadership’

Goffee and Jones open their article by saying that if you want ‘to silence a room of executives’, ask the question, ‘Why should anyone be led by you?’ They then state: “We’ve asked just that question for the past ten years while consulting for dozens of companies in Europe and the United States. Without fail, the response is a sudden, stunned hush. All you can hear are knees knocking.”²⁰ (‘Knees knocking’ is perhaps a bit dramatic but is typical of the ‘folksy’ hooks the *HBR* uses to catch the reader.)

The authors state that their specific audience within the *HBR* sphere is ‘executives and senior executives’ who want to be, or find themselves having to be, ‘leaders’ as well as executives who aspire to be *inspirational* leaders.

Stating that they have “yet to hear advice that

tells the whole truth about leadership”, the authors put forward the premise that leaders *need* “vision, energy, authority, and strategic direction” — which it ‘goes without saying’, they contend, that everyone will agree with.

They then start their ‘argument’ by explaining the method whereby they arrived at their advice for executives.

The authors refer to their **method** of research into ‘leadership’ over twenty-five years as following ‘three streams’:

1. as academics, reviewing theories of the past century “to develop [their] own working model of effective leadership”;
2. as consultants, testing their theory “with thousands of executives in workshops” and “through observations with dozens of clients”;
3. as executives, vetting their theories in their own organisations.
- 4.

In the context of a short historical review of leadership theories, the authors explain how they came to their **theory** by saying that they “ransacked all the leadership theories [over a century] to come up with ...four essential leadership qualities”:

1. “Like [Max] Weber, we look at leadership that is primarily antibureaucratic and charismatic.”
2. “From trait theory, we derived the qualities of weaknesses and difference. Unlike the original trait theorists, however, we do not believe that all leaders have the same weaknesses; our research only showed that all leaders expose some flaws.”
3. “Tough empathy grew out of style theory, which looked at different kinds of relationships between leaders and their followers.”
4. “...context theory set the stage for needing to know what skills to use in various circumstances.”²¹

The criterion for their **data** collection – their selection of ‘leaders’ to ‘study and use’ – was not about achieving superior business results as such. Rather, the focus of their research has been on “leaders who excel at inspiring people – in capturing hearts, minds, and souls”. As they put it, although this ability “is not everything in business...*any experienced leader*

will tell you it is worth quite a lot.” “Indeed”, they add, “great results may be impossible without it.” Unless executives excelled ‘at capturing people’s hearts, minds, and spirits’ they would not as ‘leaders’ have ‘followers’ in these ‘empowered times’. A person may find themselves in a “top position without these qualities, but few people will want to be led by [them].” These characteristics (as discussed in Chapter 2 of *The Leadership Mind*) fall into the ‘charismatic’ and ‘heroic’ camp of leader typologies. It appears that Goffee and Jones were able to select their set of these kinds of people primarily through the clients of their own consultancy work.

The authors’ **line of argument** is based on anecdotal illustrations using examples of well-known people in business during which their characterisation of ‘leaders’ shifts between ‘inspirational’, ‘truly inspirational’ ‘real’, ‘true’, authentic, and ‘effective’. They also mention a ‘perfect leader’, only to dismiss this as an unadvisable approach; it will not, they say, “get folks on board” because nobody wants to work with someone who ‘doesn’t appear to need help’, whereas exposing weakness “establishes trust” and “builds solidarity between followers and leaders”.

About their **results**, the authors say “some *surprising* results have emerged from their research” in that they discovered that: (i) ‘inspirational leaders’ share ‘four *unexpected* qualities’; (ii) leaders need all four qualities to be ‘truly inspirational; one or two qualities are *rarely* sufficient’; and (iii) ‘the interplay between the four qualities is critical. Inspirational leaders tend to mix and match the qualities in order to find the right style for the right moment.’²²

The authors label these four qualities of ‘leadership’ as: ‘revealing your weaknesses’, ‘becoming a sensor’, ‘practising tough empathy’, and ‘daring to be different’.²³

They refer these four qualities as ‘essential’ and ‘necessary’ for leadership and as “a necessary first step” to developing leaders. They say the quality of ‘difference’ is the most important²⁴. They cite as their exemplar of this Sir John Harvey Jones with his “moustache, long hair, and a loud tie”²⁵, without showing awareness that the latter could be regarded as merely suggesting eccentricity.

Initial issues

Several critique issues arise immediately with this typical article from the *HBR*. As is frequent in *HBR* articles aimed at people in business, a **definition**

for the core concept of 'leader' is not stated explicitly. The clearest discernible seems to be that a 'leader is an executive who has followers'.²⁶ In this way, 'leadership' is defined by 'followership' which is tautological. The circularity in the argument is further apparent when we also note that 'leadership' is considered only in the form of specific types of people, personalities, and characteristics; in other words, whatever 'leadership' is, it is already embodied and manifested in certain types of people.

The authors also mention executives being 'realistic', 'authentic' (stated to be "the pre-condition for leadership"), 'more than just playing a role'²⁷ and having 'credibility'. They state that these qualities "must become or already be part of an executive's personality."²⁸ This is an example of their argument by assertion because linking personality traits to the quality of integrity in leadership is not proven. The limitations of this method are further indicated by the fact that, at the time of writing, the quality of 'integrity' did not figure in their collection of attributes. Yet just eight years on from this argument, the quality of 'integrity' for 'leaders' was being promoted everywhere after the collapse of banks and financial institutions in 2008.

Despite their stress on authenticity as an essential aspect of 'leadership', however, it is difficult not to conclude from the thrust of their argument, including their use of exemplars, that they are basically recommending a manipulative strategy²⁹ to executives. This is above all suggested by their advice to the executive to own up only to "selective weaknesses", saying that "[k]nowing which weaknesses to disclose is a highly honed art".³⁰ Again, there is another sense here, of some 'dark arts', which is puzzling, to which they then add their "golden rule":

...never ...expose a weakness that will be seen as a fatal flaw – by which [they] mean a flaw that jeopardizes central aspects of your professional role.³¹

They continue, to advise that a "...leader should reveal only a tangential flaw – and perhaps even several of them" because "[p]aradoxically, this admission will help *divert attention* away from major weaknesses". In other words, executives should create a deflection or a smokescreen if they want to become inspirational leaders.³²

This advice is reminiscent of La Rochefoucauld's maxim: "Sincerity is openness of heart. It is found in

very few, and what is usually seen is subtle dissimulation designed to draw the confidence of others."³³ Or, in the words of Tallis: "Successful deception is built on an at least instrumental understanding of the way the other person sees or imagines the world."³⁴ Understanding how others see the world is an admirable quality that surely becomes corrupted when its purpose is to deceive people. What does this kind of thinking say about 'leadership'?

In this vein, the authors point to 'another well-known strategy',

to pick a weakness that can in some ways be considered a strength, such as being a workaholic. When leaders expose these limited flaws, *people won't see much of anything and little harm will come to them.*³⁵

Yet, at the same time, they say that the "leader's vulnerability [must] be *perceived* to be genuine" as otherwise 'the leader will not gain anyone's support and will open up themselves to derision and scorn'.³⁶ This would suggest that, although not being genuine, 'leaders' must ensure they are *perceived* by 'followers' as genuine.

All this advice is difficult to consider as internally consistent or aligned with the authenticity they state to be the pre-condition for leadership and which "must become or already be part of an executive's personality". It should be recalled that this quality is one of four claimed as 'essential and necessary' and whose 'interaction is critical for executives to be inspirational'.³⁷

In discussing the quality of 'sensing skills', they note that *by definition* this involves *projection*, that is, the "state of mind whereby you attribute your own ideas to other people and things [sic]". But they warn of a danger associated with this approach.³⁸ This is the risk of losing followers when leaders have to make "*fine judgments about how far they can go*"; consequently, "sensing capability must always be *framed by reality testing*."³⁹ The variability, if not arbitrariness, suggested in this advice would seem to run afoul, at least, of Peter Drucker's idea of trust in an organisation: "Trust means that you know what to expect of people. Trust is mutual understanding. ... *Predictability.*"⁴⁰

A further sense of inconsistency, if not (implicit and unintended) cynicism, inherent in the authors' argument is conveyed in their reference to there being "too much hype nowadays about the idea that

leaders *must* show concern for their teams”:

There’s nothing worse than seeing a manager return from the latest interpersonal skills training program with ‘concern’ for others. *Real* leaders don’t need a training program to convince their employees that they care. *Real* leaders empathize fiercely with the people they lead.⁴¹

This *realness* at face value is difficult to square with the advice that executives as leaders should select what they will reveal to their employees.

Concern about this is further heightened by the marketing of the books related to this article as being about ‘authentic leadership’. For instance, the back-cover blurb on the 2015 edition claims the authors “show how great leaders essentially act as ‘authentic chameleons’ consistently displaying their true selves throughout the changes of context that require them to play a variety of roles”. (It is instructive to check on what kind of entity is a chameleon and whether it has ‘true colours’ to consider what is being suggested here about a person and what it means to be a ‘chameleon personality’.) The use of a hedging word (‘essentially’), the contradictions (‘consistently displaying true selves’ although ‘chameleons’), the connotations of ‘displaying’ and ‘playing’, and the mangled metaphor of ‘authentic chameleon’ do not inspire confidence in the method of argument.⁴² Whatever about an animal that can change its appearance as an evolutionary survival adaptation, the metaphor of an ‘authentic chameleon’ for an executive in a business organisation is seriously confusing, to say the least.

The authors warn that their four qualities “cannot be used mechanically”, and continue,

[t]hat’s why the ‘recipe’ business books – those that prescribe to the Lee Iaccoca or Bill Gates way – often fail. No one can just ape another leader. So the challenge facing prospective leaders is for them to be themselves, but with more skill.⁴³

They advise how this can be done:

... by making yourself increasingly aware of the four leadership qualities we describe and by manipulating these qualities to come up with a personal style that works for you

and then follow this with another warning:

Remember, there is no universal formula, and

that what’s needed will vary from context to context.⁴⁴

What is one to make of this? There is no universal formula – except, of course, the authors’ claim that the four qualities they propose are ‘essential’ and ‘necessary’ for leadership. Albeit allowing that the mix must be varied for specific circumstances, this looks like a formula, acts like a formula, and so it would seem to be a formula that is being proposed.

The sense of unease is added to when, in stating that difference is the ‘most important quality’, they refer to the

...most effective leaders deliberately [using] differences to keep a social distance. Even as they are drawing their followers close to them, *inspirational* leaders signal their separateness.⁴⁵

The authors do not think that ‘inspirational leaders’ using ‘separateness’, which is left undefined, “to motivate employees to perform better” are “Machiavellian” (presumably in the usual, but incorrect, pejorative use of this label) on the grounds that such leaders “recognise instinctively that followers will push themselves if their leader is just a little aloof” since “[l]eadership, after all, is not a popularity contest”. Yet this does not feel convincing.⁴⁶

The feelings of confusion and doubt are made greater when the authors, referring to four of the most common myths causing executives to profoundly misunderstand what makes an *inspirational* leader⁴⁷, assert that it is not true that everyone can be a leader. This is despite stating that the four qualities they have identified to be a leader can be “honed by *almost anyone* willing to dig deeply into their true selves”⁴⁸ – the notion of ‘true selves’ also being left undefined. The hedging qualifier ‘almost’ is not explained, so it remains unclear why anyone willing to dig into their true selves would not be able to hone these qualities.

Notwithstanding this, the authors also say that ‘many executives’ do not have “the *self-knowledge* or *the authenticity* necessary for leadership” and, further, that these are “only part of the equation”. They continue:

Individuals must also want to be leaders, and many talented employees are not interested in shouldering that responsibility. Others prefer to devote more time to their private lives than to their work. After all, there is more to life than work, and more to work

than being a boss.⁴⁹

It now seems the authors are adding more to what they mean by a 'leader'. To their initial premise of *vision, energy, authority, and strategic direction* and their four essential qualities of *weaknesses revelation, refined sensoring, tough empathy, and difference creation*, can now be added another collection of things, such as *self-knowledge, authenticity, desire or ambition, willingness to bear responsibilities, and preferences for work and being a boss*.

Although all these features are admirable in themselves and valid as far as they go, it is clear from this list of attributes that the authors are basically proposing a personal characteristics approach to 'leadership', as reviewed in Chapter 2 of *The Leadership Mind*, with quite a list of attributes to be taken on board. As such, their approach is just another of the many types reviewed previously, and they give no criterion for choosing their one over others.

We must also ask: did the authors answer their own question?

Their stated question was 'Why should anyone be led by you?' Every question implicitly has a point of view from which it is asked. In this case it would seem to be that of someone purporting to be of 'leadership' capability: 'Who am I that people should *acquiesce* to be my followers?'

However, the question they appear to answer is: 'How can someone attract people to be *their followers*?' This is from a different point of view. It concerns how an executive can influence, manage, or even manipulate people into following them through personal characteristics and learnable tactics, skills, and techniques for communication laid down by the authors. The putative 'leader' is manoeuvring employees into being their supporters, loyalists, or whatever. This is what the authors appear to mean by 'leadership'. Thus, the four essential and necessary qualities they propose only constitute their advice as to how to 'influence people' and 'win friends'. It is not directed at people considering why they would *agree* to 'follow' some executive (setting aside any authority of the executive over employees in an organisation, *e.g.*, being the 'boss').

The difference may seem subtle, but it is important in the balance of *how to think* about 'leadership'. This is not the purpose of the authors' argument, the only thrust of which is to tell people *what to think*. In this instance, it is telling executives what to think about

how to get 'followers' to meet their condition for an executive being a 'leader'. It is not about executives providing leadership in any meaningful sense other than in the sense of getting people to follow them, in which case then they are deemed to be leaders by the authors' definition. Here we can see how the authors' definition of the core concept of 'leadership', such as it could be discerned, shoehorned their thinking from the start.

Fundamentally, the authors' argument is about surface matters, the style of behaviour required to get people to follow *whatever*. It is not the content of 'leadership'. The content of 'leadership' was taken care of at the outset with an *assumption*, with which they said *it went without saying that everyone would agree*, that 'leaders' *need* vision, energy, authority, and strategic direction. Whether one agrees or not, the clichéd words appear to be saying nothing more than that someone should be alive.

In conclusion of our criticism of the *HBR* approach, these issues are indicative of the inconsistency and incompleteness that are inherent throughout *HBR* articles like this, which do not hold themselves to a coherent grounding in logical and empirical methods.

■ THE FLAWED APPROACH OF THE *HBR*

Turning to the critique part of our criticism, we can ask, what are we to conclude overall about the *HBR* type of 'argument' as represented by our selected example?

Answering that requires us to address three related questions – What is the import of our detailed analysis? Is it significant for thinking about 'leadership'? Does it matter to senior managers and others?

We suggest the answer to the three questions is 'yes' and proceed to support that view.

In the sample *HBR* article, the authors' style of argument is one of making their claim based on 'supporting' examples. This method is common in business articles where the inspiration of *affective* anecdotal and capsule stories is the primary way of persuading readers about an author's position on something. It can be a valid method when conducted rightly, but the constraints of the *HBR* style generally do not allow for that. We should note here again that there is no logic, formula, or measuring scale to determine for us the confidence we can place in an 'argument' by this method. It will be a matter

of judgment based on experience as to whether to accept an argument made in this way.

Judgment is therefore what we must now bring to bear on the 'thought leadership' approach to thinking. We must do so because, when we look to the other side of the equation, 'thought followership', we are being asked to defer our thinking to others – in effect, to think through others, to let others do our thinking for us. But such deferring cannot be the measure of 'leadership'.

In brief, we believe that the flaws we revealed in the thinking, underlying methodology, and techniques employed in this kind of *HBR* article point to the inconsistency and incompleteness that are inherent throughout articles like this, which do not hold themselves to a coherent grounding in logical and empirical methods or transparency about creative aspects of their theorising.

The issue then, as indicated by this representative example, is whether the method of the *HBR* is convincing in the case of the authors' argument about how to be a 'leader' and, therefore, about 'leadership'.

We suggest it is not and consider a few reasons.

The authors seek to persuade us to accept their claim without showing how they came to their four necessary qualities other than through reading the literature and their consultancy work.

Even then, as they proceed, the whole thing falls apart as more and more requirements for being a 'leader' are added. This piling up of requirements is not the established method of cumulating examples to sustain a hypothesis. A convincing method of argument also requires that illustrations and examples be cumulative and connected. It demands that the authors explain their case, explore their examples, turn them around, so to speak, for readers to see their place in the argument, and generally consider them. The authors here do not do this or cannot do it in the *HBR* format. They can only assert someone as an *exemplar*, and they do not explore it as an *example* with the required rigour to be judged convincing.

There is the related matter of how their exemplars were selected, as noted already. Effectively, they are saying, trust us, we know best, we picked these guys (all but one of their dozen examples are men, and the sole woman gets a brief mention only in relation to 'caring'). Again, we are back to having to make a judgment, but not of the validity of an argument and the reliability of a conclusion, but

of persons, the authors. Thus, we are being asked to defer to others in our thinking because they are deemed 'authorities'. By whom are they deemed to be authorities? By the *HBR* itself pursuing its own interest in promoting itself as a 'thought leader' and by setting up *their* authors as authorities because the *HBR* deems itself to be *the* authority.

Whatever about the paucity of 'leader' examples cited, there is no connecting them across the qualities asserted as necessary and essential to be a 'leader'. These qualities remain effectively independent and add nothing to each other, at least in the way the examples are deployed. As they are not arguing by accumulating *and* connecting examples, they are asserting rather than creating any type of explanation and, therefore, they leave us standing on weak ground.

To be clear, and to avoid any distraction about our criticism of the *HBR* approach to readers, this is not a matter of doubting any author's character, ethics, or qualifications. But, as a method and style of argumentation, *HBR* is, in effect, only saying 'trust us' to the reader. In other words, 'follow us', defer to us as the authority – that is, use us to do your thinking for you.

Why should we do so? Perhaps, as the *HBR* marketing indicates, its audience is made up of busy people who do not have time to *stop* and think for ourselves.

We suggest that this is not a satisfactory stance towards the reader. Choosing ideas like we choose butter is not a good enough way to choose something as important as the ideas with which we are to think. Clear thinking, which is crucially what 'leadership' needs today, is not about someone's word as authority or the reader being influenced by authority, rather it is about using reason.

Like many others in such *HBR* articles, the authors wave the influential 'cause-and-effect' model over their 'argument', as from an incense burner, and implicitly appeal to this for persuasiveness. In other words, they purport to identify the cause(s) that *will give* certain effect(s) – that if I, the putative 'leader', behave in a certain way (*cause*), then I *will be* a 'leader' (*effect*). But such an approach is totally inappropriate for what is a complex matter.

Another reason the *HBR* approach is not convincing is that they are not dealing with sustainable entities. The authors of the example article

are using particular people at a phase in their lives with the danger (likelihood?) that, no sooner are these presented as examples, then they are gone as exemplars. The danger of this approach was illustrated by the famous work of Waterman and Peters on excellence in companies.⁵⁰ The message taken at the time of publication of this influential study of top companies in 1982 was that eight qualities of excellence underpinned the success of companies and had now been discovered. The trouble was that it did not take long for the competitive and other variables to remove the examples being used to support their claim from the excellence standard. This is not to say that the companies, no less than the selected people, in these kinds of studies were not excellent because they may have suddenly failed or collapsed or let you down as an exemplar. The nature of people and companies is that things change for them, so this approach does not deal with lasting, general cases or examples, something in general that stands the test of time. One of the things that changed for the Waterman and Peters companies was that the competitive system threw up better companies. In the competitive world, others are always seeking to surpass the incumbents and very often they succeed. That is why this method must accumulate and connect appropriate examples to justify the claim and sustain the case.

The above has established the serious consequences of the *HBR*'s editorial policy for the field of thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations.

The question that this prompts is whether the editorial mission of creating 'thought followers', as distinct from the content of any article, matters or not, and if so, how? In the next section we show through an example how this mission is being put into play in a wider arena.

Spreading the *HBR* model

The influence of the *HBR*'s editorial mission is such that it is extended well beyond the pool of subscribers to its print and other channels. Articles on 'leadership' in the business sections of various media such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, frequently show themselves as operating in the thinking space created by the *HBR*.

It may be tempting to ignore this genre as being of no significance. That, however, would be a mistake because the significance lies not in the merits or otherwise of any single treatment but in the constant

repetition of certain well-worn tropes and in the superficiality and triviality of the content.

Perhaps what is worst is the constant simplification of the idea of 'leadership', that as a practice it is simply a matter of following a few rules and that little or no thought is required.⁵¹ Thinking about 'leadership' in business in this way is easily slipped into the psyche to work its insidious effects – the very effects we are seeking to counter with our argument to be aware of how we are thinking.

An example of this type of newspaper article is one we came across by chance in the business section of *The Irish Times* of January 18, 2019 – 'Becoming a leader: how to take that book learning and make it happen' by Sebastian Green and Patrice Cooper. The authors are presented as a former university Professor of Management working as 'senior executive coach with expertise in leadership...' and a lecturer in management 'with particular interest in leadership'.

Our chief interest in the article is less in the specific content, although it is the concrete material for criticism, than in extracting the template that such articles use. By observing the template being employed, the reader will immediately see that such a boiler-plate approach is of necessity limited and gives little room for actual thought leadership.

The article's headline refers to '*becoming* a leader', and yet the first sentence says, 'You have landed a leadership position'. Even if we allow that the newly appointed person still must *become* a leader, a reference to the appointee being 'an inexperienced leader' does not augur well. An alarm should be sounding already for the same reasons we saw in the Goffee and Jones example: incoherence is a feature of this mode of thinking about 'leadership', and there is the invariable slippage between 'leadership' and 'management' that is a common feature in the *HBR* space.

This, however, is only the starting point in articles of this format; the drama of the journey facing the hero is yet to come in these prototypical three-act stories where the plot is broadly one of challenge, failure, and redemption in the classic style.

The article is addressed to a person 'newly appointed to a leadership position' and, passing over the obligatory clichés ('rubber hitting the road' and militaristic metaphors, such as 'marshalling the troops'), it claims to give practical advice for 'actioning all that good management stuff you have learned' to meet the challenges of 'taking control',

‘being innovative’, ‘motivating and inspiring followers’, and so on. The authors, referring to the person’s ‘inexperience as a leader’, will offer some way through the ‘perplexity and confusion’ of these demands, despite the necessary slippage, to success.

Thus, we see how, at base, these articles will play on what we earlier in this essay called ‘leadership anxiety’. This is not the anxiety that may naturally arise, for example, in taking up any new position but the anxiety induced by the confused state of thinking about ‘leadership’ in business and, we suggest, to which such articles are important contributors. It will clearly play the ‘fear card’ by exploiting the lack of confidence a person may be feeling – “... as an inexperienced leader, you can find yourself trapped in a paradox: how to wield power while being a servant?”. The *HBR* marketing system is almost coercive in that regard.

We can note in passing that the concept of ‘leader’ here, echoing Goffee and Jones, is for now a person who wields power while appearing a servant.

The anatomy of the anxiety will be further exposed with a list including the need to “inspire with vision while soliciting participation, engagement and commitment”, the danger of “[gravitating] between feeling like imposters, fraudsters or charlatans” and “omnipotent, grandiose, demigods” which the authors state, in a nod to the psychotherapeutic viewpoint, are features of “narcissistic wounding” to which “research suggests leaders are particularly prone”. Unavoidably, the ‘new leader’ who wants to ‘become a leader’ is already in urgent need of counselling as the possibility (likelihood?) of failure is looming in the journey.

Thus, we see how these articles will seek to broaden their audience and thereby their impact by adding a catalogue of monsters to the dramatic tension of the ‘story’ of the ‘leader’s journey’ (to an unspecified destination) with a warning to ‘leaders’ that, once the (presumed) initial surge of success *is* disrupted (as it seemingly always is), there will be the early character challenges of becoming a ‘leader’ – the ‘imposter syndrome’ and the ‘arrogant narcissist’ – with the comforting assurance that both can be overcome if the proffered advice is taken.

Again in the manner of Goffee and Jones, it is stated that these threats can be avoided by ‘finding the authentic self’ that is always inside and, moreover, that this will bring the ‘necessary credibility

and trust’, although it will require behaviors such as ‘humility, respecting the past’ (*contra*, for example, the Silicon Valley mantra for success of ‘moving fast, and breaking things’), and so on.⁵²

In this manner, pieces like this pile on the stock phrases for readers to take in by a kind of osmosis because there is little if anything demanding them to think; what they are being offered is an easily swallowed pill and the exhortation to ‘get on’ about the ‘task’ of ‘*becoming a leader*’. This is the nature of the boiler plate modus operandi of this segment of the ‘thought leadership’ market.

This catalogue of monsters will then invariably require the ‘newly appointed leader’, as they will be informed, to undertake redemptive acts such as devoting some time in their busy lives to ‘reflecting, listening, and grounding’. This presumably is because the plotline being followed demands “epiphany’ at some point. The enlightenment will be explained as avoiding the common habit of ‘jumping to the solution mode’ of ‘once-size-fits-all’ and ‘off-the-shelf-solutions’ when confronted by difficulties because of ‘unintended consequences’, and thereby the need to “appreciate that deeper reflection and understanding” is in order. They will, therefore, be warned of the ‘understandable danger in today’s world, especially early on in the new role’, of hastening into ‘action’ and confusing a ‘focus on action rather than reflection and self-awareness’ as ‘an indication of leadership capability’. They will be directed towards a stance of patience, such as ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’ (hints of, but *contra*, Drucker on ‘leadership’ as ‘more doing than dash?’), to avoid “the pitfalls of bad leadership” which is “as important as embracing the received wisdom about good leadership”, and to be “aware of why good leaders make bad decisions... and that sometimes bad leaders make good decisions”.

They will be told, in the vein of Goffee and Jones, that ‘becoming a leader’ will above all involve learning to say certain phrases to demonstrate ‘vulnerability’ and ‘likeness to everyone else’ such as ‘I don’t know’, ‘I’m wrong’, and ‘I’m responsible’. This is because the initial ‘honeymoon period’ following appointment in which ‘mistakes’ will be tolerated (presuming the appointee was allowed one) *will* be brought to an end somehow by someone nasty or a crisis event.

Thus, the drama will unfold. Accordingly, there

will be warnings about ‘sharks circling in the pool’ – that is individuals who will be ‘inherently detracting, naturally disrupting, personally envying, or overly ambitious’ (only individuals, not groups, which would bring a more complicated problem into the story). These will be the individuals who are probing for any weaknesses to exploit against ‘the leader of the group, team, or organisation’. Inevitably, even the ‘newly appointed leader’ will be advised that they must be the one to see the antics of such people as ‘signals’ to alert them to what is ‘wrong with their organisation or themselves’ (not with these people, because there is no advice being made available to deal with such people) and to turn these ‘messages’ to good use (and so, if the organisation were righted, presumably these people would behave well and maybe even change character). The slide from the individual who may be inadequate to the job to the issues being ones of the organisation will be noted here.

Some, but not many, advisory articles will acknowledge a fact of complicated organisational life that some staff are just simply bloody minded, fearful, and belligerent although they will not say so in such simple direct terms.⁵³ Hence, we often see a subtle and fascinating change of focus taking place at this point in the consulting game and reflected in the sequence in the typical newspaper advisory article. Faced with such difficulties, which they will be informed may be complex or worse, the ‘newly appointed leader’ (and perhaps the ‘worn out leader’) will be offered a menu from which to choose clichés for their ‘thinking’ from the consulting industry: ‘avoid one size fits all’, ‘don’t fall for off-the-shelf solutions’, ‘problems are opportunities’ and, if we are being more sophisticated, warnings about ‘confirmatory bias’ and other psychological propensities that have become mandatory from some bestselling business books.⁵⁴

That is about as practical as it gets much of the time in these kinds of newspaper articles. Hence, the shift of perspective must be continued to get away from the obvious dilemma posed by the unavoidable situation outlined in the previous two paragraphs.

Thus, ‘the game may be upped’ and the focus will be shifted again by introducing the exemplars, the heroes of the ‘leadership’ drama, and declaring that the ‘best leaders’ tolerate, even relish, the challenges of ‘wicked’ problems⁵⁵, the ‘complex, ambiguous, the

contradictory, and the paradoxical’. Hence, ‘leaders’ must “build the [unspecified] capacity to work at the edge of certainty and uncertainty”, but this stance is, unfortunately, “all too often compromised by leaders’ own view that they should be god-like, with all the answers, infallible” with the “attendant risks of turning into a control freak, and an arrogant one at that”.

There will be the ‘wisdom’ moment, supplied in the form of ‘lessons’ from the ‘seasoned leaders’ (suggesting the authors consider ‘leadership’ to be a lasting condition) about how ‘changed perspectives, mindsets’ and possibly, more sophisticatedly, ‘mental models’ will happen and that capabilities will be developed to resist the ‘trap’ that the ‘leader’ must have ‘all the answers’. We can see here how the *HBR* playbook, which we saw in the Goffee and Jones case study, is also followed.

Further, this ‘wisdom’ will usually include realising at some point that the ‘job of leader’ is finally about ‘identifying the problems’, ‘forming the questions’, and ‘setting the agenda’. This will deliver liberation for the ‘newly appointed leader’ who is probably feeling beleaguered at this point from the barrage of issues being fired in their direction. Instead of having to come up with the solutions and answers, they will be relieved to be advised that they only need to engage in ‘inviting’, ‘harnessing’, or even ‘harvesting’ the ideas of others (recalling the advice for becoming a ‘thought-leader’ observed in the second case study above).

Again, there is an incoherence about this way of thinking since there is likely to be no surprise when a few years later the CEO is presumably in trouble for not having had the ideas to solve the problems and is removed. Although, by this logic, it is surely others who have failed to have the needed ideas, presuming the advice was taken and that there was the capability to invite, harness, and harvest in the first instance (another challenge, albeit a big one, and one not usually advised about in these short pieces).

The ‘leader’, who remember is ‘always responsible’, may be faced with another obstacle in the drama of their journey to success, bringing another unannounced shift in perspective, as *they* may be made ‘the problem’ in the guise of being ‘power-hungry’ or a ‘self-centered ego’ who will cost the company dearly in terms of ‘loss of trust, loyalty, and focus’.

The ‘new leaders’, who presumably are not ‘pow-

er-hungry' and 'self-centered egos' will be advised to "recognise right at the outset" that "a primary function of 'effective leadership' (*pace* Drucker on 'leadership' being an aspect of 'management') is to 'develop leadership potential and new leaders throughout the organisation'. The bottom line, the 'newly appointed leader' will be told, is that this 'shifts the agenda' from 'being all about oneself' (as another implicit assumption slips by) to being 'all about the other'. At this point the tricky 'staff issues' of the kind noted above are left hanging, lost in the horizontal mist of 'organisational development and leadership' and mutterings about the importance of 'trust' and so on.

In conclusion, there will be the obligatory sending of the 'hero' on their way at the final curtain: "The trick is to steer a path through the Scylla and Charybdis of management arrogance, omnipotence, and vulnerability so that one does not sink beneath the waves. Leadership is a dangerous occupation and survival by no means assured."

■ OBSERVATIONS AND CRITIQUE

The approach as stylised above is clearly an offshoot of the *HBR's* 'thought followership' model with its superficial way of thinking and writing about issues in business which has implications for thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations.

First, mention will be sometimes made of 'research' but mostly in vague terms. For example, there are no citations or references to what is being asserted, which would assist readers to check the grounds and reliability of the claims as well as to follow up for more information and understanding.

Second, articles like these do not give any clear methods for thinking with for oneself, possibly because this is good for generating consultancy and training project revenues in the 'leadership development' industry.

Third, these kinds of pieces rarely contain anything by way of 'lessons' from first-hand experiences of 'leadership' or even of the struggles and the challenges of 'becoming a leader', of successes and failures, and anything about how it all ends in joy or tears. Life is missing. So is the genuine thinking which, as Hannah Arendt put it, is grounded in personal experience.⁵⁶ This genre is invariably derivative and, in that regard, much the same as the 'thought-leader' stuff reviewed above.

By way of formal criticism, we note that none of

the content in this typical article flows logically, that key assumptions are mostly left implicit and that crucial concepts are rarely defined. All these basics are treated as beside the point in this business and in these types of articles. The format of the newspaper article undoubtedly plays a role in this, but that is not a decisive factor, rather it is the whole way of thinking about 'leadership' that is the object of our critiques.

Also, words like 'leadership' are used but it is not always clear what content the authors put under them as labels for concepts and, therefore, what content one should have in mind when reading these types of articles. This leaves us with the problem of concern to us here: what do such articles usually mean by 'leadership'? We are usually left with having to figure out the unstated definition of the key concept or the relationship between definitions, which are often inconsistent, for ourselves. This carries the risk, of course, that what we come up with may not correspond to what the authors had implicitly in mind – if they had anything in mind.

One reason for the ensuing confusion is the fact that key concepts, in this case 'leadership' or 'leader', are rarely defined clearly, with the result that authors tend to start with the person, deeming them from the outset as a 'leader'. Nevertheless, and peculiarly, they are still going to be advised about how to be a 'leader'. Thus, we have the typical case of the person who, even if being 'newly appointed' to a 'leadership position', is apparently already a leader, although perhaps an inexperienced one and so in need of the advice being given. Further, this view would seem to suggest that 'leadership' is seen, even if implicitly, as a matter of experience and so would also bring up the question, experience of what? 'Leadership'?

■ NORMALISING 'THOUGHT FOLLOWERSHIP'

As well as the above type of content found in the business media, there are many self-styled 'thought leaders' operating in the social media space to extend this ethos into and throughout everyday business life. Operating as 'influencers' in the 'lower end of the market' of ideas as products, selling themselves as a brand that offers so-called 'thought leadership' in easy-to-digest packages. Like others in the current phenomenon of 'social influencers', their game is to use a typical tactic of peer pressure – the 'fear of missing-out' – to sell the idea that success comes

through becoming a ‘thought-follower’, thus obviating the necessity to think for oneself.

It is as if the seeds germinated in the hothouse of the *HBR* and similar entities have begun to spread and have taken root and begun to thrive in every corner of business, creating a domain of restricted thinking where ‘thought followership’ is now the norm and it is no longer necessary, or acceptable, to think for oneself.

A little reflection on this aspect of the business world will give a clear sense of how pervasive it is. Consequently, although it is easy to dismiss what the ‘influencers’ have to say, their impact on business culture cannot be easily discounted. Further, an examination of the resumes of this kind of ‘thought leader’ is sufficient to suggest the vacuity of their content.

The average resume of a typical so-called ‘thought-leader’ – their book blurbs, websites, social media pages, *etc.* – invariably include a series of claims about themselves – not their *thinking or ideas* as such, but about their opinion of themselves. This opinion is usually expressed in business clichés, such as being a ‘keynote speaker’ (nowadays, of course, at a TEDx event); a regular contributor to fashionable international business events; an expert and global authority in some claimed specialisation; an outstanding ‘blogger’ and author of pioneering book(s); a winner of awards and accolades from various professional associations and representative bodies in their field; an adviser to all and sundry (and of course, with company logos prominently spread around); and, most of all, ‘passionate and driven’ to make the world a better place.

There is also, as a matter of course, an ‘origin’ or ‘founder’s’ story, the mandatory account of their ‘personal journey’ of growth, discovery, and success along with some epiphany that made them realise that they must share their enlightenment with the world.

Their ‘products’, it will be claimed, are ‘evidence-based’, although their research data will consist primarily of anecdotally reported interviews with other ‘leading thinkers’ in their field, with ‘inspirational leaders’ of the world, and with ‘outstanding practitioners’, especially CEOs who probably have already endorsed the self-proclaimed ‘thought leader’. From these interviews they will have distilled their core message, in effect their brand statements, and

the interview statements will invariably serve to promote the brand. That is, the interviews are primarily marketing rather than research tools. Their mode of exposition is telling ‘temporary’ stories of success, invariably of personal and organisational ‘transformations’, for (temporarily) lifting the spirits of everyone, (temporarily) creating a ‘warm glow’ and ‘halo effects’, and (temporarily) spreading the ‘feel-good factor’ throughout the client’s organisation. Their promise is to impart the skills and knowledge for ‘high-performance’ in a fast-changing world. One of the main effects is to give CEOs the happy fuzzy feeling that they are doing something for ‘their people’.

As well as the many individual operators operating in this fashion, there are also those who operate as ‘thought-leaders’ within an organisation or company offering problem-solving and consulting advice to other companies.⁵⁷ There is also the idea that CEOs, to be ‘leaders’, must show themselves to be ‘thought leaders’, and some do by blogging and other such activities.

The forum, however, in which the ‘thought-leader’ operates in is not an issue; it is all the same business. The issue is the claim to being a ‘thought-leader’ with the implication that others should relate to them as such – that is, as their ‘thought followers’.⁵⁸

■ BRINGING TOGETHER THE OVERALL THEME

At the start of this essay, we asked the question: how is the state of confusion in the field of thinking about ‘leadership’ in business organisations being endlessly sustained, where practitioners are confronted with a bewildering array of definitions of what should be the basic and key concept?

As an answer, we proposed as a working hypothesis that this confusion is perpetuated by business interests promoting a business model based on ‘thought-leadership-followership’ targeted at business practitioners.

We carefully set out our argument in support of this in steps (‘thought trains’) so that practitioners could make up their own minds about our hypothesis’ validity and usefulness at each stage for their own thinking.

To start, we outlined that the nature of the so-called ‘thought leadership’ business is not about *ideas-as-such* but rather about manufacturing ‘ideas-as-content-of-products’ to be marketed to ‘customers’

to generate income for companies and individuals. The customers thus become 'followers'.

As a concrete example of 'thought leadership' as a business, we selected the renowned *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*), showing how its editorial policy is concerned with creating 'thought followers' rather than providing original and challenging ideas. This corrupts the genuine 'ideas business', that is, of ideas-as-ideas and real thinking leadership.

We also showed that this editorial policy developed over time through a series of editorships and came to full fruition by harnessing the power of digital media. The *HBR* as a business is aware of and fully buys into the 'thought-followership' strategy. This is clearly conveyed by, for example, statements by its current editor, an article on 'becoming a *HBR* guru' to attract 'thought followers', and an *HBR* podcast interview with one of its leading contributors on how to create 'thought followers'.

Next, a detailed examination and assessment of a representative and classic *HBR* article on 'leadership' demonstrated how the *HBR* editorial policy determines its treatment of ideas, that is, as products, as it practically implements its 'thought-leadership-followership' business model.

After this, we turned to the issue of the wider influence of the *HBR* business model by showing how its 'thought-followership' philosophy is spread by writers in various business media stereotypically following the example of the prestigious and dominant *HBR*.

We then showed how the *HBR*'s influence is further extended by self-styled 'thought leaders' on social media and, thereby, made pervasive and unavoidable throughout daily business life. These self-styled so-called 'thought leaders' are actually 'thought followers' recycling old ideas. They are simply in the business of promoting themselves as a brand to generate business, customers, and incomes. Their 'product content' is bereft of any semblance of genuine leadership in thinking and ideas and is simply vacuous and best regarded as noise to be ignored. Nevertheless, as narrow as their self-interest and as limited as their thinking may be, they play a significant role by helping to normalise the attitude that 'thought followership' is an acceptable stance for 'thinking' in business.

We believe that the above argument is an important part of the answer to the question of how

the state of confusion in the field of thinking about 'leadership' in business is sustained and what perpetuates it.

With this argument in mind, we can identify some overall implications of this situation to show that 'thought leadership' matters for a number of reasons.

■ OVERALL IMPLICATIONS

We believe we have established that there is merit in taking the argument above as a working hypothesis and watching how it plays out in practice and its effect on us.

This is a matter of judgment, however, since there is no external rule or weighing scale to determine the balance. Consequently, whether as a reader we are persuaded is a matter for each of us to decide for ourselves and, if we are not, to identify what more we would require to reach a sustainable position on this aspect of the field and to justify that position. An argument such as this is ultimately about our personal standards of judgement. Therefore, we hope that our critique at least helps readers to make their own judgment on this important question.

If it is agreed, however, that the 'thought-followership' business model is unacceptable for the good of business, and thereby for the good of society, then it must be confronted and called out for what it is: an unacceptable mess. This is the fundamental matter we can attend to *about ourselves* if we are no longer comfortable with the endless flow of 'consultancy' type products on 'leadership', which show no sign of converging on a sustainable, workable concept of 'leadership', as it would contradict the *HBR* mode of thinking about the field of 'leadership' and undermine its current business model.⁵⁹

It is one thing for the *HBR* to pursue its business interests in the way we have shown. It is another matter what is going on in the field of thinking about 'leadership' in business that this behaviour is being continued indefinitely. Recognising the basic flaw in *how* thinking has been conducted about 'leadership', as we saw in Chapter Two of *The Leadership Mind*, emphasises the need for new thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations. We must think anew.

The primary challenge for us is that we *stop and think* about 'leadership', which then raises the issue of *how we think* about 'leadership', so that *what we think* comes last in the sequence of thinking priorities, although ultimately it is *what* we think that

will govern our immediate conduct.

For this exercise we will be inviting readers to *think with us* as we move into exploring the phenomenon of 'leadership' in a new way. Our style of argument will be fundamentally different to the *HBR's* and we set out our contrasting philosophy in more detail in the appendix accompanying this essay. It will demand much more of the reader who wants to think clearly about the central matter of 'leadership' in business organisations.

■ ENDNOTES

1 Joseph C. Rost. *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1999, page 46.

2 Warren G. Bennis. Leadership Theory and Administrative Behavior: The Problem of Authority. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 4 (3), December 1959, page 259-260.

3 Keith Grint. *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, page 1.

4 Such job advertisements rarely articulate with clarity what they mean by the word 'leadership'. For example, an advertisement for a managerial position at senior executive level, just below equivalent to CEO level, in an Irish third level education institution utilised the usual cut-and-pasted phrases about the requirements for 'leadership' qualities (post title represented by X): "significant demonstrable X leadership and transformation experience for an organisation of scale and complexity", "above all, leadership", "demonstrate... leadership experience", "and a strong, inspirational leader", "responsible for leading", "customer focused X leader" " ", "To lead", "devise and support effective leadership initiatives", and "evidence of leadership and commitment".

However, a request, in the name and business address of one of the authors was made to another senior executive, in terms of reviewing the job description and asking for "some clarification of what is expected by way of 'leadership', which seems to be a key aspect of the remit, yet has no detail as to what is [sic] criteria are to be used for assessment", elicited the following clarification:

"The advertisement says that 'applicants must have significant demonstrable X leadership and transformation experience for an organisation of scale and complexity...'. "

This means that candidates must be able to demonstrate that they have led a X department or an X team in a large entity."

The circularity will be apparent, and one is left pondering what potential applicants are to understand of this specification and then how a selection board is to know what to think in making their recommendation on foot of the specified requirement for 'leadership'. A quick application of 'The 'Leadership' Clarity Test' suggested in a later section of this chapter would have shown that the words 'headship' and 'head' could have been used instead and achieved clarity of communication to potential candidates.

5 An example of this is the sales pitch for *10 Must Reads on Leadership, Volume 2*, published by the Harvard Business Review: "Stay on top of your leadership game. Leadership isn't something you're born with or gifted as a reward for an abundance of charisma; true leadership stems from core skills that can be learned. Get more of the leadership ideas you want, from the authors you trust, with 'HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership (Vol. 2)'." (Harvard Business Review *et al.* HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership, Vol. 2 [with bonus article "The Focused Leader" By Daniel Goleman]. Accessed on 8.7.2021, 11:53 at <https://store.hbr.org/product/hbr-s-10-must-reads-on-leadership-vol-2-with-bonus-article-the-focused-leader-by-daniel-goleman/10362>.) Another example, responding to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, is the sales pitch for *Coronavirus: Leadership and Recovery: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review*, published 28 July 2020, which includes: "Get up to speed and deepen your understanding of the topics that are shaping your company's future with the Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review series. Featuring *HBR's*

smartest thinking on fast-moving issues, each book provides the foundational introduction and practical case studies your organisation needs to compete today and collects the best research, interviews, and analysis to get it ready for tomorrow. You can't afford to ignore how these issues will transform the landscape of business and society. The Insights You Need series will help you grasp these critical ideas--and prepare you and your company for the future." (Harvard Business Review *et al.* Coronavirus: Leadership and Recovery: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review. Accessed on 8.7.2021, 12:15 at <https://store.hbr.org/product/coronavirus-leadership-and-recovery-the-insights-you-need-from-harvard-business-review/10449?sku=10449E-KND-ENG?autocomplete=true>.)

6 Duff McDonald. *The Golden Passport: Harvard Business School, the Limits of Capitalism, and the Moral Failure of the MBA Elite*. Harper Collins, New York, 2017, page 188.

7 McDonald, 2017, page 191.

8 The trend has been recognised by Adi Ignatius while also acknowledging the importance of the magazine brand: "People still value the print edition of the magazine. As an editor I can say it's okay if they didn't. We can do everything on the web, but print is still a preferred medium and the most premium expression of what we do. So it's very important." Adi Ignatius. Interview with Caysey Welton. *Folio* (foliomag.com), May 21, 2020. Accessed at <https://archive.foliomag.com/harvard-business-review-forging-ahead/> on 13.4.2022, 12:07.

9 Harvard Business Review. Harvard Business Review Guidelines for Contributors. Accessed at <https://hbr.org/guidelines-for-authors> on 12.4.2022, 12:10, emphasis added.

10 McDonald refers to much of HBR's digital-only product as "falling into cookie-cutter patterns" (2017, page 306).

11 Harvard Business Review. Harvard Business Review Guidelines for Contributors. Accessed at <https://hbr.org/guidelines-for-authors> on 12.4.2022, 12:10, emphasis added.

12 Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey. *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organisation*. Harvard Business Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2009, 16.

13 Peter Drucker. Interview with Bill Moyers. *A World of Ideas*, 1989. Transcript published at billmoyers.com, 2 April 2015. Accessed at <https://billmoyers.com/content/peter-drucker/> on 8.4.2022, 15:04.

14 Adi Ignatius. Interview with Mark Miller. *Medium* (medium.com), 31 December 2020. Accessed at <https://medium.com/authority-magazine/harvard-business-reviews-editor-in-chief-adi-ignatius-on-bringing-a-timeless-institution-into-the-adeb989299c0> on 4.2.2022, 16:15.

15 Dorie Clarke. *Stand Out: How to Find Your Breakthrough Idea and Build a Following Around It*. Portfolio/Penguin, New York, 2015.

16 We may note here the lovely, and recommended, little booklet by Young (James Webb Young. *A Technique for Producing Ideas*. McGraw Hill Advertising Classic, McGraw Hill, New York, 1965) which works from the principle that any new idea is a combination of old ideas as well as that the interview would appear to be referring to the technique of using metaphors, in this case ballet, for stimulating creativity for designing products, such as a washing machine. There is an enormous technical and popular literature in all media formats on creativity and innovative thinking, including bestsellers such as Johnson (Steven Johnson. *Where Good*

Ideas Come From: The Seven Patterns of Innovation. Penguin Book, London, 2011). The feature of interest about writings such as *Stand Up* is not that they have anything new to say about the creative-innovative process but that what they say is presented under the cover of 'becoming a thought-leader' and is pitched into the 'thought-leader' genre of business literature.

17 Note the gender switch in the hypothetical example as to who has a 'strong brand' and who has not!

18 Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones. Why Should Anyone Be Led by You? *Harvard Business Review*. September - October, 2000, pages 61-70.

19 Reprinted, for instance, in: *Leadership Insights* in the *Harvard Business Review* Special Article Collection (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2010); *On Leadership* in HBR'S 10 Must Reads Series (Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, 2011); *Harvard Business Review* On Point Collection *Ego Makes the Leader*. 2nd edition, Product No. 5890; *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You? What It Takes to be an Authentic Leader*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2006, New Edition with new Preface by Authors, 2015; and also, there are the direct sales of Reprint R00506 by HBS Publishing, including customised and quantity purchases by companies.

20 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 63.

21 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 65.

22 Goffee and Jones, 2000, pages 64-65 (emphases added).

23 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 64. Their method could be considered to be an informal or casual type of factor analysis but obviously without any of the controlling statistical criteria for selecting the preferred variables.

24 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 68.

25 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 69.

26 Goffee and Jones, 2000, pages 61,63,65,67, 68.

27 Goffee and Jones, 2000, pages 65, 68.

28 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 70.

29 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 70. The invalid justification of the 'manipulative mode' by executives is explained by MacIntyre (Alisdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Duckworth, London, 1985, page 74.

30 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 66 (second emphases added).

31 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 66.

32 Elsewhere, Goffee and Jones acknowledge that changing 'organisational culture' is manipulating how people relate to one another and affecting their quality of life which may or may not be for the better and discuss some moral-ethical considerations. They state: "Anyone who manages other people has the opportunity, and even the responsibility, to make decisions that will inflict personal discomfort or even suffering for the sake of the collective good." (Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. *The Character of a Corporation: How Your Company's Culture Can Make or Break Your Business*. Profile Books, London, 2002, pages xvii, 201.

33

34

35 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 66 (emphases added).

36 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 66 (emphases added).

37 This critique can easily be extended by, for example, the application of what Thomas Sowell calls ‘thinking beyond stage one’. Such an exercise would likely test this approach to breaking quite quickly. Sowell tells of a teacher at Harvard asking him what policy he would advise on on an issue of the time. He answered with an explanation of the beneficial consequences he expected. His teacher then asked: “And then what will happen?” Sowell spelled out the next level of effects. His teacher then asked him: “And what will happen after that?” On Sowell’s further elaboration, he was asked: “And *then* what will happen?” At this point, Sowell said he was beginning to realise the complicated consequences of his favoured position and that it might make things worse (Thomas Sowell. *Applied Economics: Thinking Beyond Stage One*. Revised and Enlarged Edition, Basic Books, New York, 2009, page 6). ‘Stage One Thinking’ is common but can hardly do, as thinking beyond stage one is basic to thinking about strategic interactions in business affairs.

The unease arising about this advice is also increased by taking the viewpoint of The Arbinger Institute in *Leadership and Self-Deception* that, no matter what we are doing on the outside, people primarily respond to how we feel about them on the inside and, moreover, no matter how skilful we may be at disguising true attitudes, people can sense when we are seeing them as objects rather than as the whole person. (The Arbinger Institute. *Leadership and Self-Deception*. Penguin Books, London, 2017.) Also: “One of the axioms of psychotherapy is that the important feelings one has for another always gets communicated through one channel or another - if not verbally, then nonverbally.” (Irvin D. Yalom. *Love’s Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*. Penguin Books, London, 2013, page 114.) Goffee and Jones are talking about ‘signalling’, about which there is much written in Economics and elsewhere. For example, this matter is explored from a biological-evolutionary perspective in Pentland and Heibeck (Alex (Sandy) Pentland and Tracy Heibeck. *Honest Signals: How They Shape Our World*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008). It is dealt with more practically by Meyer (Pamela Meyer. *Liespotting: Proven Techniques to Detect Deception*. St Martins Press, New York, 2010). There is an extensive book and article literature on techniques and trainings for spotting lies and deceptions. As just one example, Nobel (Carmen Nobel. How to Spot a Liar. *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, 13 May 2013. Accessed at <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/how-to-spot-a-liar-on-12.4.2022>, 15:30) reports on an experimental study into the language of deception, conducted to equip people with tools ‘to detect and deter unethical behaviour’, as finding ‘key linguistic cues’ in participants’ behaviours, such as running of the mouth, excessive use of third-person pronouns, and increased profanity depending on telling ‘flat-out lies’ or ‘deliberate omission of key information’ (Deepak Malhotra, Lyn M. van Swol, and Michael T. Braun., Evidence for the Pinocchio Effect: Linguistic Differences Between Lies, Deception by Omission, and Truths. *Discourse Process*, 49 (2), 2012).

The concern expressed here (does “here” refer to what you are saying or what the study just cited is saying?) arises without even extending concerns to the positive roles of qualities such as trust, credibility, commitment, and reputation among people for organisational success and continuity.

There are other sources of concern, some of which come from ethical positions about dishonesty and lying and others which address the implications and consequences for ‘leaders’ themselves as well as for ‘followers’, which range from deception to lying as well as hypocrisy, self-betrayal, and self-deception. These are not considered or even noted as possible issues for the specific advice given or the overall

approach. Such issues are the subject, for example, of neuroscientist Sam Harris who defined lying as “to intentionally mislead others when they expect honest communication” (p. 4) and resulting in “both a failure of understanding and an unwillingness to be understood” (p.40-41) (Sam Harris. *Lying*. Four Elephants Press, np, 2013). More personal consequences are explored by Rich (Adrienne Rich. *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*. Adrienne Rich In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. Norton, New York, 1980, pages 185-194): “The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy. They are the most interesting thing in life. The liar is someone who keeps losing sight of these possibilities.”

Stronger still would be the line of thought flowing from Arendt (Hannah Arendt. *Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers*. In Hannah Arendt. *Crises of the Republic*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973) and, more generally, from Bok (Sissela Bok. *Lying: Moral Choice in Private and Public Life*. Quartet Books, London, 1978).

Different angles on the complex issue of authenticity could be based on the contrasting and more sophisticated analyses of, for example, Taylor (Charles Taylor. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991) and Trilling (Lionel Trilling. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971), to mention just two in a well-explored territory, as well as, for example, Judt (Tony just. *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998) about the moral responsibility of public figures, which ‘top managers’ could arguably be considered (as MacIntyre places them as we see in Chapter 8).

On the other side, it should be noted that some readers of the article do not take issue with its details as here. For example, William J. Byron, a Jesuit priest and economist teaching corporate responsibility in the School of Business and Management, Loyola College, Maryland (William J. Byron. *The Power of Principles: Ethics for a New Corporate Culture*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2006) draws support from Goffee and Jones for the idea of ‘tough love’ in his chapter on ‘Love’ (p.190-192) and, in that context, notes uncritically the “four unexpected qualities” for being an ‘effective inspirational leader’.

38 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 67 (emphases added).

39 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 67 (emphases added).

40 Peter Drucker. *Managing the Non-Profit Organisation*. Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, 1992, page 89 (emphasis added).

41 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 68 (emphases added).

42 The matter of ‘authenticity’ has become a perennial issue in the ‘leadership’ field in recent decades following scandals by the ethos of companies in banking and finance and other industries. A representative example is George (Bill George. *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2003). George, a former Chairman and CEO of Medtronic, rejects ‘the great man theory’ and ‘characteristics’ and ‘style models of ‘leadership’, (models of leaderships also rejected by James March in his critiques outlined in Chapter 11). George argues that ‘leaders’ who are ‘authentic’ and ‘responsible’ create greater shareholder value than financially driven companies. He recommends developing the ‘five essential dimensions’ he identifies of ‘authentic leaders’: ‘purpose’, ‘values’, ‘heart’, ‘relationships’, and ‘self-discipline’ through transformative work. George, in responding to some critiques of the idea that ‘authenticity’ is the key for ‘leaders’, says that the essence of ‘authentic leadership’ is Daniel Goleman’s ‘emotional

intelligence, or EQ: "People with high IQs and low EQs can hardly be called authentic leaders. In contrast to IQ, which basically does not change in one's adult lifetime, EQ can be developed. The first and most important step on this journey is gaining self-awareness". The 'vital role of self-awareness' was elaborated in George with Sims (Bill George and Peter Sims. *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2007; [updated and enlarged as] Bill George. *Discover Your True North: Becoming an Authentic Leader*. Wiley, Hoboken New Jersey, 2015) in which steps were recommended for people to achieve 'deeper understanding' of themselves as the way to becoming 'authentic leaders': 'exploring life stories and crucibles, engaging in introspection and reflection practices, seeking honest feedback, understanding their 'leadership' purpose, and becoming skilled at tailoring their style'. These, in our view, are aspects of good management (and of decent and mature people) which we position at what we term the 'working out' stage of a business – that is, as an aspect of 'management'.

43 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 70.

44 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 70.

45 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 70 (emphasis added).

46 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 70.

47 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 67.

48 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 63 (emphasis added).

49 Goffee and Jones, 2000, page 67 (emphases added).

50 Robert H. Waterman and Tom J. Peters. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*. Harper and Row, New York, 1982. This was the founding text of the 'excellence franchise'. There are later editions with different companies to those presented in the original version of the argument.

51 Occasionally an article will break ranks, to use the kind of metaphor favoured by these types of articles, to assert that 'leadership' is a gift or quality someone is born with. That, however, is not common for the obvious reason, if no other, than it not being good for business: what does an adviser advise the advisee in that case and how can it be charged for?

We would also add that, whatever about getting a clear and useable concept of 'leadership' for thinking with in daily work, the matter of 'leadership' in practice is far from the simplistic matter conveyed in these articles as otherwise it would hardly be the perennial and challenging issue that it has been.

52 It is unlikely a coincidence, since many of the authors of such pieces in the field of management are *aficionados* of the storytelling or narrative style of 'theorising', that these articles, long or short, utilise in unsophisticated ways some of the basic storytelling patterns and plots of novels and drama. This includes having the 'hero' ('embarked on a quest') face seemingly insurmountable challenges and obstacles on their journey ('a voyage into a new, strange and threatening world') only to surmount them ('overcoming the monster') in the end through 'enlightenment' earned by their grit and courage. We can observe these forms playing out in the cinema and television all the time. For example, just seven basic plots are identified across a wide range of literature in Brooks (Peter Brooks. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984).

53 There is no doubt that organisational life is challenging and can be difficult at times. In general our organisations reflect the plurality of people found in open society and

the many situations that arise and need careful managing and relating with, for e.g., some people get sick, others get difficult, emotionally upset, resist change, feel threatened, and sometimes people need support for all sorts of reasons including relationship breakdown, grief, financial, or other personal circumstances that arise in life.

54 For example, the excellent Daniel Kahneman (Daniel Kahneman. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2011) has been highly influential in business circles as evidenced, for example, by his book's long-standing entry in the New York Times Bestselling List for Business Books. The New York Times. Business. Accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/business-books/> on 13.4.2022, 14:59.

55 Grint, 2010, page 16.

56 'My assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.' Hannah Arendt. *Between Past and Future*. New York, Penguin, 1954, 1968, page 87.

57 For example, the local website of one the international brand consulting companies says, "Our *thought leadership comes in many forms*, including industry and consumer surveys, regulatory papers, and economic forecasts" and assures clients that: "Our *thought leaders* bring a powerful combination of experience, technical expertise, passion and personability to every project – which means our *clients receive advice* that comes from the heart and mind. They offer deep, reflective thinking on the issues and challenges that clients face right now, not mere opinions on the latest trends."

58 This does not reflect any particular individual person. Any coincidence with a particular person is, as it is put, entirely coincidental and does not imply any evaluation; our concern is with the claim to 'thought-leader' as such, the originality of the 'thoughts', and the presumption that others will be their 'thought-followers'. As will become apparent our issue is with the business model on the basis of which the 'thought-leader' conducts their business and which drives their 'thoughts', *i.e.*, 'content' as they call it.

59 The very idea of 'thought-leadership' and its accompanying claim for 'thought-followership' points a question to us: what is it we need or want? Kegan outlines two aspects of this problem common in management literature. One is of a kind of 'addiction' to the approval of others and, in the case of the issue here, to the ideas of others rather than taking responsibility to shape our own ideas. The other is feeling a 'learning deficit' which must be remedied by some *downloading of information* into our otherwise unchanged mind. The first is about getting something 'bad' out of us and the other is about getting something 'good' into us. The 'us' is an unchanged order of mind: we are being subjected to *training* as a static mind to behave differently rather than *enlarging* as a dynamic mind to be different. Robert Kegan. *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, pages 163-164.

