

"WHY FOLLOW THE LEADER ?"

by

Manfred KETS DE VRIES*

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* Manfred KETS DE VRIES, INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France

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Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries *

* Professor of Organizational Behavior and Management Policy,
the European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD),
Fontainebleau, France.

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Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries

"He was a great thundering paradox of a man, noble and ignoble, inspiring and outrageous, arrogant and shy, the best of men and the worst of men, the most protean, most ridiculous, and most sublime. No more baffling, exasperating soldier ever wore a uniform. Flamboyant, imperious, and apocalyptic, he carried the plumage of a flamingo, could not acknowledge errors, and tried to cover up his mistakes with sly, childish tricks. Yet he was also endowed with great personal charm, a will of iron, and a soaring intellect. Unquestionably he was the most gifted man-at-arms this nation has produced." (Manchester, 1978, p.3)

Thus reads the opening paragraph of William Manchester's biography of General Douglas MacArthur. In this passage the enigmatic qualities of his personality are well captured. Manchester describes a person who is different, a giant of a man, not easily disregarded. We find ourselves face to face with someone who knows the ins and outs of the influence game. This leader looms larger than life. It is hard to remain indifferent to him. Those who knew him either admired or disliked him. Whatever reservations we may have about MacArthur's behavior, be it his

exhibitionism, his haughtiness or his inconsistencies, we cannot doubt his leadership qualities. As one of his officers said, "I'd follow that man - anywhere - blindfolded" (Manchester, 1978, p.5).

When we come across a description like this, a leader comes alive and starts to affect us. There is an element of immediacy in such descriptions that stimulates the imagination. Unfortunately, the same can hardly be said of leadership research. A look at Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership suffices (Bass, 1981). Reading through this gargantuan tome can be a sobering and bewildering experience. Even the casual reader will quickly discover that finding one's way in the domain of leadership is like walking on quicksand. There is very little to hold on to. One political scientist even made the cynical remark that "all paths to the study of leadership end up swallowing their subject matter" (Wildavsky, 1980, p.12).

In leadership literature we come across both "great man" theories (Borgatta, Couch & Bales, 1954; Jennings, 1960) and "environmental" theories (Mumford, 1909; Murphey, 1941; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). While the former emphasize the impact of leaders on their environment, the latter point of view transforms the leader, as it were, merely "into a bus driver whose passengers will leave him unless he takes them in the direction they wish to go" (Simon, 1976, p. 134). According to this view it does not make much of a difference who is in charge; societal constraints

will determine the kind of action taken (Pfeffer, 1977). Although Herbert Simon acknowledges that leaders have "minor discretion as to the road to be followed" (1967, p. 134), observation of leadership in action demonstrates that leaders can do more than that. Leaders are influenced by events but can also be catalysts of events. Leadership is not just the outcome of various social forces. To use a metaphor of Robert Tucker, "the leader is not merely an actor (however great) in a play but the playwright as well" (Hoffmann, 1967, p.109). Certain situations such as crises may facilitate leaders' rise to pre-eminence, but leaders do make a difference by virtue of their actions or even lack of action at certain important moments. A debate concerning the primacy of person versus situation, however, is like the nature-nurture conflict, bound to become sterile in the end. Naturally, to understand the intricacies of leadership we have to look at the person-situation interface (Bass, 1960).

To be able to do this in a systematic manner we also have to study the psychology of a leader's followers. In this context some of the obvious questions to ask are: what makes followers so susceptible to leaders? what is happening to their state of mind? What are the nature of the dynamics of this complex interaction process between leader and followers?

Willner (1984) gives some answers to these questions in her discussion of charismatic leadership. She suggests that the

leader-follower relationship has the following properties: 1) the leader is perceived by the followers as somehow superhuman; 2) the followers blindly believe the leader's statements; 3) the followers unconditionally comply with the leader's directives for action; 4) the followers give the leader unqualified emotional support (p.8). Although Willner is referring to truly transformational leaders, giving examples of third world countries, such factors as "leader-image", idea acceptance, compliance and emotional commitment seem to play a role in any form of leadership.

Most studies on leadership don't take such a historical and observational perspective. Instead, two dimensional studies abound, often creating an element of sterility by contrasting rather simplistic behavioral dimensions such as "consideration" with "initiating structure" or "autonomy" with "democracy" to capture what in reality is very complex behavior. No wonder - given the piecemeal nature of many of these studies - that numerous aspects of this elusive phenomenon remain unexplained. What adds to the confusion is that very little agreement exists among investigators. Ambiguity in the definition and measurement of the concept itself is partially to blame. Multiple interpretation of the same phenomenon is more the rule than the exception. What may also contribute to this sorry state of affairs is the proliferation of simulated studies of leadership or studies with a rather flexible definition of what leadership

really is, which water down its meaning by including the 'leadership' of lower level managers or foremen. Sole reliance on data derived from indirect devices such as questionnaires add to the level of ambiguity. The discrepancies in conclusions drawn make us wonder how much laboratory studies, survey research only, or observations of lower level executives really add to our knowledge of what makes for true leadership.

Although we may fail to define or measure effective leadership we do, however, recognize it when we see it. If anything, true leaders know how to motivate us. They know how to get things going. These are the people who make things happen that would not happen otherwise. Truly effective leaders transcend managers, thereby putting themselves in a different league (Zaleznik, 1976). Such leaders play a transformational role (MacGregor Burns, 1978). They are the ones who create their own environment and make us part of it.

Much of what makes leaders function can be learned from the way they deal with the people and events around them. It is the way they behave and act which makes them different. This makes direct observation and first hand reports even more important. One student of leadership put it very plainly: "There is a startling lack of evidence on what leaders actually do" (McCall, 1976, p. 139). This being the case, perhaps it is again time to go back to basics - instead of leaving the job up to journalists - and study

what leaders really do by observing their behavior and actions in their natural setting (Minzberg, 1982).

At the risk of adding to the existing state of confusion, I would like to list some of my own observations on what makes top executives effective leaders. Any assessment of the qualities of effective leadership becomes so difficult, however, because of the interaction of three sets of variables. Obviously, leadership is not only a function of the leader but is also made up of a complex interaction process which consists of leader, followers, and the context in which they are operating, the latter sometimes being called the "historical moment" (Erikson, 1978). Given the limited scope of this paper, I will not elaborate on followers' psychology or social forces. Instead, my main emphasis will be on the actual behavior of the leader. I will try to tease out through interpretation of behavior and actions some of the qualities that make for leaders' effectiveness (Levinson, 1980; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). Naturally, as this will produce a kind of "shopping list" of qualities, it is unlikely that any leader will possess them all.

My data base consists of a series of observations of twenty-five top executives augmented by data collected from historical and observational studies of leaders or personal records. To a certain extent this study can be viewed as being complementary to previous work done on personal factors associated with leadership

(Stogdill, 1948, 1974; Bass, 1981). Naturally, given the rather limited data base this account should be treated as a series of hypotheses about effective leadership not as the final word or a rigid framework. In listing the various qualities I will give examples of political and business leadership taken from the public domain.

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A few decades ago, Charles de Gaulle, a great leader himself, wrote:

"... there can be no prestige without mystery, for familiarity breeds contempt... In the designs, the demeanor, and the mental operations of a leader there must be always a "something" which others cannot altogether fathom, which puzzles them, stirs them, and rivets their attention ... if one is to influence men's minds, one must observe them carefully and make it clear that each has been marked out from among his fellows...

This attitude of reserve demands, as a rule, a corresponding economy of words and gestures... There would even seem to be some relationship between a man's inner force and his outward seeming... the great leaders have always carefully

stage-managed their effects." (De Gaulle, 1975, pp. 58-59)

In the same vein de Gaulle lists as other characteristics of leadership "a readiness to launch great undertakings and a determination to see things through to the end" (p.46). He adds that the leader "must aim high, show that he has vision, act on the grand scale" (p.64). And he continues by saying that the effective leader needs to be well informed of the details of specific situations and not only think in abstractions or vague, generalized theories (p.80). He adds that a leader "must outbid his rivals in self-confidence" (p.104).

Charles de Gaulle knew what he was talking about. He had ample opportunity to test his ideas. His concept of leadership does not permit mediocrity: it is of a grandiose nature. He belonged to that rare group of individuals sometimes called charismatic leaders (Weber, 1964). These are the leaders who hold a mysterious spellbinding power over their followers, the type of people who become transforming agents able to "shape and alter and elevate the motives and values and goals of followers" (MacGregor Burns, 1978).

De Gaulle derived his experience from having taken on the role of France's guide and head of state. Many years of training as a soldier and resistance fighter went to prepare him for this role. And when the opportunity eventually came, he rose to the occasion.

De Gaulle was a master in the influence game. He knew how to sustain his power base through direct, dramatic appeals to the people. Crisis management - as during the Algerian situation - was his forte. In spite of the damage to their self-esteem which the loss of this long cherished dominion entailed for the French, De Gaulle was able to unite the nation behind him. His style, his skills in stagecraft and the radiation of self-confidence in his appearances made many of his otherwise highly unpopular actions palatable.

When we analyze his statements carefully we can discern a number of themes which are echoed by other leaders in action.

The "Dream"

As de Gaulle indicated, effective leaders are propelled by vision. They have a view of the future that becomes highly compelling to others. As a good example we can take Franklin Delano Roosevelt's concept of the "New Deal" which became his way to fight the Great Depression. Hitler had a vision of a new Germany as described in his book Mein Kampf where he predicts the coming of the Thousand Year Reich. Gandhi imagined an India after the British where Hindus and Moslems would live in harmony. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream" of harmony between blacks and whites was of a similar visionary nature. In describing their "dreams", leaders

often use the imagery of a journey: of a path to follow, or of being at a crossroads.

We can see how these magnificent obsessions create a focus and make for a sense of direction, thereby mobilizing followers to pursue a course of action to its successful conclusion. What seems to happen is that leaders create a shared vision of the future. They seem to be able to mold the images in their internal, private world in such a way that these become acceptable on the external, public stage. What differentiates these people from others is that they possess starkly pronounced internal scripts - mental codes for representing experiences which guide their behavior (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Zalesnik & Kets de Vries, 1985). These "scripts" are based on the way an individual interprets early relationships of the self with significant others, and are transmitted to the followers in such a way that they create a shared reality. They become the "'sustaining myth', or set of myths, which gives the people composing the societies a sense of what it means to be a member of them" (Tucker, 1981, p. 143). Eventually they become the building blocks for action.

General Douglas MacArthur is a good case in point. Reading his Reminiscences we realize the extent to which his internal world was populated with the heroic images of his grandfather, father and older brother. His life's task became to emulate a father described by his comrades in arms as "magnificent ... afraid of

nothing ... who would fight a pack of tigers in jungle ... who became the hero of the regiment" (MacArthur, 1964, p. 9). Such exalted imagery was combined with the confidence created by a mother who would tell him: "You'll win if you don't lose your nerve. You must believe in yourself ... or no one else will believe in you. Be self-confident, self-reliant, and even if you don't make it, you will know you have done your best" (MacArthur, 1964, p. 18). With such a support system of reliable, dependable figures incorporated in his inner world, no wonder that MacArthur became the leader he was. Moreover, and not surprisingly in the light of his specific background, part of his destiny was "to return" and be the liberator of the Philippines, a country which his father had once ruled as governor general, from its Japanese invaders.

In the business realm, we can observe similar processes at work. For example, the first Henry Ford foresaw a cheap car for the masses at a time when automobiles were becoming more and more luxurious and expensive. We can surmise from his actions that the catalyst for that dream was a wish to ease the life of the farmer. A major theme in his "inner world" was to engage - in a psychological sense - in some form of reparative effort vis-a-vis the farmer. The "vehicle" for achieving this became the Model T, the "farmer's car" (Jardim, 1970). The "dream" of DeWitt Wallace, the founder of Reader's Digest, the world's most widely read magazine, was to present books and articles in a simplified form

to uplift and ameliorate the lives of its readers. Walt Disney had a vision of family togetherness through wholesome entertainment for the entire family.

Symbol Manipulation

An essential part of effective leadership is communication. Leaders need to articulate their "dreams" and make these attractive to their followers. They do this using language, ceremonies, symbols and settings. Historical and mythological figures will also be evoked and emulated, tapping cultural roots; these are all strategic manoeuvres to mobilize support. Here leadership and stagecraft join forces. Leaders emanate theatre. Effective ones possess great oratorical skills and know how to make use of humor, irony and the colloquial. What differentiates effective leaders from others is that they know how to talk directly to their followers' unconscious, employing figurative language such as similes and metaphors. Doing so, facilitates identification by the followers. Moreover, in presenting their ideas their sense of timing often seems uncanny and is a key factor in making their actions so effective. They are masters in the creation of suspense.

The unsettling emotional nature of these symbolic methods of communication makes for their spellbinding quality and induces

reactions of dependency, regression and transference (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). Leaders, in one way or another, create in their followers a desire to be taken care of. And given the expectations they raise, they seem to be the logical figures to do the care taking. Idealization of the leader by his followers is part of this process. Leaders reawaken past relationships of dominance and submission. In this transference process a misrecognition takes place - there is a confusion between past and present. Earlier dependency relationships are revived. Significant individuals from childhood become intertwined with contemporary figures. The leader becomes the depository of the followers' fantasies. And even incompetents will have the benefit of the doubt and will profit from this psychological process. Thus, to some extent, each leader becomes a product of our own fantasies.

Freud compared the peculiar psychological relationship between leaders and followers with that of a hypnotist and his subject (Freud, 1921, p.81). In such a dialogue, simplification, stark contrast and extremes become the rule; dramatization is essential. Truly effective leaders know how to use simple language. Their message comes across easily.

Effective leaders are masters in the manipulation of appearances. Part of this process entails scapegoating: the splitting of the world in "us" versus "them" or "good" versus "bad" become familiar

patterns. Personal fears, aggression and aspirations are projected onto the outside world toward social causes which allow for symbolic solutions. Enemies are identified and have to be eliminated. Lasswell (1960) argued that private motives become displaced onto public causes and rationalized in terms of the public interest. This regressive process of externalization may result in a release of tension. Freud, following Le Bon, a French student of group behavior, said:

A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association (just as they arise with individuals in states of free imagination), and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable agency. The feelings of a group are always very simple and very exaggerated. So a group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty. (Freud, 1921, p.78)

With this knowledge of the regressive potential of group processes in mind we can see how a political leader like Winston Churchill could engage in high drama and stir his audience by saying to those who joined him in his fight against Hitler "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat". Douglas MacArthur vowed "I shall return", making these words to the Filipinos a symbol of victory and freedom, a magical promise that they would be liberated from the Japanese. John Kennedy meanwhile stated in

his inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Although on a less grandiose scale, business leaders use comparable imagery. The first Henry Ford's slogan about the five dollar day temporarily made him the saviour of the working man. IBM's Thomas Watson Sr.'s almost religious attention to service became legendary. McDonald's Ray Kroc would stress the themes of quality, service, cleanliness and value. Harold Geneen of ITT on his part was looking for "unshakeable facts"; he designed a network of organizational spies and staged meetings resembling show trials to communicate through fear how important information and control systems were to him.

Network Building Activity

Effective leaders possess great interpersonal skills. They are master communicators not only on a mass scale but also at a more intimate level. After all, it has been the support of a core group of dedicated followers that has helped them to get where they are now. Those who rise to the top are very skilled in influencing, controlling and manipulating their followers. What serves them well in this respect is that they seem to be able to deal with emotionally tough situations. They are capable of providing some kind of "holding environment", thus managing to contain their followers' emotions. The more effective leaders are

very sensitive to other people and possess the ability to listen, and to understand others' points of view. As McCall and Lombardo (1983) discovered in their findings on successful and unsuccessful leaders, "the most frequent cause for derailment (along the path to the executive suite) was insensitivity to other people" (28). In their study, the ineffective leaders turned out to be the ones who were abrasive, intimidating and unwilling to partake in the give and take of the influence game. Instead, their defenses tended to be rigid and they managed their emotions poorly.

Effective leaders are also masters in the creation and maintenance of organizational networks for interacting with and monitoring the activities of their key subordinates (Kotter, 1982; Luthans, Rosenkrantz & Hennessey, 1985). They are very aware of those on whom they are dependent and vice versa. They manage their relationships with them very carefully. Hiring, firing and promotion become some of the tools to maintain their networks. The resource allocation process including the management of information become other ways of fostering these interdependencies.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt exemplifies a leader who possessed great talents in handling this particular facet of leadership. His skill in network building and manipulation was legendary. To illustrate, one of the first things he did after taking office was to develop an organizational intelligence system to prevent

himself becoming a captive of the complex official bureaucracy of Washington. A well known analyst of his presidency, Richard Neustadt, recorded:

Not only did he keep his organizations overlapping and divide authority among them, but he also tended to put men of clashing temperaments, outlooks, ideas, in charge of them. Competitive personalities mixed with competing jurisdictions was Roosevelt's formula for putting pressure on himself, for making his subordinates push up to him the choices they could not take for themselves. It also made them advertise their punches; their quarrels provided him with not only heat but information... (Neustadt, 1960, pp. 157-158).

Pattern Recognition

In studies of effective leaders their ability to recognize patterns and relationships among seemingly disjointed events has repeatedly been emphasized (Isenberg, 1984). Leaders are masters of sense making, of bringing order to the chaos which tends to surround them. Effective decision makers possess the cognitive ability to sort relevant from irrelevant information. They know how to prevent themselves being swamped by sensory and informational overloads (Lipowski, 1975). They are what has been called "reducers" (as opposed to augmenters) having the ability to limit the amount of stimulation impinging on them. This

characteristic enables them to deal with complex, novel and interesting situations without impaired task performance, cognitive disorganization or health problems (Petrie, 1967). Through selective combination and selective comparison they know how to weave connections. This makes them highly skilled in putting together isolated pieces of information. Effective leaders possess the ability to manage conceptual complexity. They are flexible in the cognitive differentiation and integration of information, so that data can be processed according to the needs of the situation (Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). If simple information processing is required, dissonant information will be rejected. But if the situation warrants it, effective leaders will integrate and combine multiple points of view simultaneously and look for novel solutions.

Many of the more effective business leaders whom I encountered differed from other people in their tolerance for high arousal levels. To use Kipling's words, "they kept their heart when all about them were losing theirs". They would successfully engage in multiple activities without feeling overcommitted or experiencing a sense of discomfort and exhaustion.

Empowerment

Charles de Gaulle once remarked that the real leader should aim

high and carefully draw out his followers. Indeed, effective leaders are the ones who communicate high performance expectations to their followers and show confidence in their ability to meet these expectations (House, 1977). By making their followers feel significant they manage to motivate them. Their high expectations seem to enhance their followers' sense of self-esteem and feelings of competence thereby influencing their effectiveness. Effective leaders know how to create commitment. By harnessing the energies of their followers and translating intention into sustained reality, they encourage them to attain unexpected results.

We don't have to look far to find examples in the political sphere of how to transcend followers' more pedestrian preoccupations. John Kennedy was to say when he became the Democratic presidential candidate: "We stand today on the edge of a new frontier". Charles De Gaulle expressed the same kind of confidence in his followers when he stated at the beginning of World War II that "France has lost the battle but she has not lost the war". More than a hundred years before him, his predecessor Napoleon Bonaparte proclaimed confidently that "every French soldier carries in his cartridge-pouch the baton of a marshall of France". What all these leaders had in common was the ability to create an atmosphere of excitement, enthusiasm and motivation among their followers.

Tracy Kidder (1982) describes how a group of computer wizards at Data General was motivated to achieve the impossible. Under the

leadership of Tom West, against impossible odds, they created a new computer symbolically called "The Eagle" within one year. Statements of confidence on a large, rather abstract scale are thus reinforced by more individual, personalized assertions. And given the results, it can be seen that this kind of special treatment has great motivational value.

Competence

In Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership (1981) technical skills are listed as a very important factor in effective leadership. Leaders need to be familiar with the substance of the matter. They have to know what they are talking about. If not, they will quickly lose credibility. Thinking in purely abstract terms is not good enough. Not only is it essential that leaders recognize the "big picture", they also need to be familiar with the specifics of the situation: this will enable them to be realistic in making recommendations. Some familiarity is therefore needed with the exact nature of the work which has to be done.

Chairman Iacocca of the Chrysler Corporation is a good case in point. It goes without saying that his skills in dramatization were essential in saving the ailing corporation. Anyone possessing a television set would agree. Without that skill, he would not have been given financial assistance from the government, received the backing from the unions to accept a pay

cut or persuaded consumers to buy his cars. One other key factor, however, was his intimate familiarity with the ins and outs of the car industry. He knew what it meant to build an automobile. He understood how different segments of the production process interacted. He knew how to use control systems to pull together the disparate fiefdoms that made up Chrysler. It was this specific knowledge that made him so effective when articulating his vision about organizational renewal.

Hardiness & Perseverance

To be a leader one requires a certain amount of hardiness. A lot of endurance is needed to cope with the stresses and strains of a rapidly changing environment. Effective leaders know how to manage stress. What differentiates these people from others is that they possess a positive and stable self-image (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987). They firmly believe that they can control what affects their life (Rotter, 1966). In their behavior they exude a sense of meaningfulness and they interact vigorously with their environment; they are committed to the activities in their lives, and see change as a challenge (Kobasa, 1979).

With hardiness comes perseverance. True leaders belong to that group of people who do not easily give up, those who keep on trying and insisting that their demands are met. They will stick to their original objective in spite of all the difficulties.

Their preoccupations can make them sound at times like a broken record but they are convinced that such behavior will eventually bear fruit. Furthermore, if so required, these individuals know how to wait. They will bide their time and wait for the right moment. Effective leaders believe firmly in their ideas and are willing to see them through whatever the setbacks. They keep on asking, talking, explaining. They have incredible staying power; they never let be. Their inner script with its "magnificent obsession" keeps them going. They emanate integrity. Their actions are characterized by consistency and predictability making it easier for others to work with them.

Studying the life histories of many entrepreneurs, one finds that the factor perseverance returns over and over again. The architect of Europe in integration , Jean Monnet, is a good case in point. In his memoirs he wrote:

"I am not an optimist. I am simply persistent. If action is necessary, how can one say that it is impossible, so long as one has not tried it? ... Events that strike me and occupy my thoughts lead me to general conclusions about what has to be done ... I can wait a long time for the right moment. In Cognac, they are good at waiting. It is the only way to make good brandy." (Monnet, 1976, p.44)

William DeWitt Wallace, the founder of Reader's Digest is an

example from the business world. Although he met with general discouragement for his particular formula for a magazine, his hardiness and persistence made his venture an immediate success. And so was Walt Disney. In his case, it took a long time before distributors became interested in his animated mouse. Only after he added sound to his first two rejected "mouse" films did he draw their attention.

Enactment

Persistence and hardiness alone are not good enough, they have to be combined with enactment. Many people have lots of ideas, but that is the stage where things usually remain. No progression is seen from idea to implementation. Effective leaders, however, are different. They go one step further and are the doers, bringing about their own environment (Weick, 1979); they are proactive. Such people have a great ability to initiate and sustain interaction with others. They know how to come up with new ideas and make these viable.

What helps trigger enactment is high achievement motivation, the need to do something better than has been done before. This high need of achievement is very characteristic of effective leaders. Such individuals strive to make things happen, and have entrepreneurial talents. They are willing to take calculated risks. However, they do recognize when risk taking can become

excessive (McClelland, 1961).

CONCLUSION

In this account, I have called attention to some of the major qualities which have to be taken into consideration in distinguishing effective from ineffective leadership. Although I do recognize the importance of the social setting and the psychology of the followers, for the purposes of this paper these dimensions have largely been ignored.

Leaders are symbols. They are outlets of identification for their followers and will serve as scapegoats when things go wrong. In this interactive process, power becomes the binding force between leaders and followers, the currency on which most of these relationships will depend. Unfortunately, effective leadership and the wise exercise of power do not necessarily go together. In the leader-followers dialogue, regressive group pressures and delusions of grandeur are ever present and may lead to the abuse of power and eventually to the leader's fall. The true leader, however, is the one who knows how to balance reflection and action by using self-insight as a restraining force when the sirens of power are beckoning.

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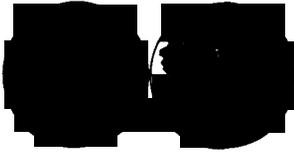
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