



Three Myths of Leadership

Martha Freymann Miser, PhD

My husband likes to poke fun at my profession. He insists that if you put the word *leadership* into the title of any publication, it will immediately go to the top of the best-seller list. “*Leadership for Losers*,” he says, “it’s a slam dunk! Write it, and we can retire on the profits!”

Like any good joke, my husband’s contains more than an ounce of truth. In fact, he’s identified a very real issue: Leadership is a booming industry. And apparently everyone is an expert on leadership. With this in mind, we need to ask ourselves a few critical questions: Exactly what are we selling? For whose benefit? And toward what end?



It’s an inescapable fact that leadership research and writing in the past few decades have largely focused on the business sector. Many critics are uncomfortable with this, arguing that the close relationship among leadership professionals, the business sector, and business schools is perpetuating dangerous misconceptions and outdated stereotypes. Richard Barker (2001), one of these critics, writes that much of “leadership research . . . is ultimately a ponderous confirmation of conventional knowledge and little else” (p. 475).

In my experience, much of the “conventional knowledge” Barker is writing about can be traced back to three myths of leadership.

Myth 1: Leadership is “Good”

Barbara Kellerman from Harvard Kennedy School tells us we tend to equate leadership with bravery, skill, and good character. Westerners have long been fascinated with kings and military leaders who exemplify these qualities, and that fascination, she says, has made us susceptible to thinking that leadership is by default a good thing. This inspired Kellerman to write a book called *Bad Leadership* (2004), in which she examines leaders who fall into one of seven categories: incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, or evil.

She reminds leadership enthusiasts of “Hitler’s ghost,” a blind spot that keeps us from acknowledging that leadership can be deployed for both worthy and wicked ends. Kellerman’s point is clear: Unless we examine our assumptions, unless we think critically about leadership, we may well fall into the trap of glorifying people in power.

Myth 2: Leadership is Synonymous with “The Boss”

In today’s lexicon, the term *leader* is regularly used to describe top executives; and the term *leadership team*, to describe the top tier of those executives. This sloppy labeling creates the impression that leadership is only about the behavior of people with hierarchical power, an impression that seems to permeate most organizations. In my work, I interact often with middle managers and highly skilled professionals, and yet I rarely hear them refer to themselves as leaders.

Instead they reserve that designation for those in more senior roles, paying deference to those at the top as if they were imbued with special qualities and knowledge. In the process, many of these managers and professionals learn to suppress their own voices and abdicate their own power. And that’s costly for both the individuals and their organizations.

Myth 3: Good Leaders are Heroic

If you have the opportunity, as I often do, to ask people to describe good leadership, they are likely to respond with a list that combines the attributes of Steve Jobs, Nelson Mandela, Jack Welch, George Patton, and Superman. Underlying that response is the most powerful myth of all—the myth of the heroic leader. We all know this archetype: a solitary individual, almost always a man, with qualities of “toughness” and “greatness,” who rides into town and single-handedly saves the day.

What is most troubling about the heroic model is that the leadership industry often suggests we develop leaders in line with it. This bias is embedded in our businesses, for example, in the form of leadership competencies, which are more often than not built on studies of Western

organizations that are predominantly male and white. We then instill these competencies via 360s, coaching, education, and performance management.

This stereotype is particularly problematic for those who don't look like the majority culture — women, people of color, and non-Westerners. In my experience, this hyperfocus on heroic leadership pushes many promising leaders self-criticism, anxiety, and perfectionism. It drives them to fixate on their inadequacies rather than their gifts.

Once we loosen the grip of these myths, several new perspectives on leadership begin to emerge. Here are three insights I've found useful in my leadership practice.

Insight 1: Leadership is a Process, Not a Person

What if leadership isn't about the attributes of an individual or the powerful position that individual holds? Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) suggest that leadership is a *process* of mobilizing people to tackle adaptive challenges. By *adaptive challenges*, they mean complex problems that have no clear solutions and that require people to change their values, beliefs, or behavior. Two examples are immigration, a current social issue, and health care, an industry challenge.

When facing adaptive problems, we tend to want someone with authority or expertise (that is, a hero) to take charge; instead what we need are conveners and facilitators —leaders who understand that their role is to give the problem back to the people who can and must find a collective solution.

This thinking produces a new definition of *leadership*: Leadership isn't a person. It's a process of influence that moves people to confront the values, attitudes, and beliefs that are preventing them from thinking, living, and working more creatively and courageously.

Insight 2: Leadership Demands Self-Awareness

Adaptive leadership calls for self-awareness, a new set of leadership skills that help us step back and observe, reflect, and learn. Self-awareness demands that we pay attention to what's going on between our ears, in our hearts, and in our guts. Only when we learn to recognize our worldviews and habits of thought, our assumptions, our hungers and triggers, are we able to distinguish our own “wiring” from what's happening in the world around us.

Only then can we see the bigger picture, hear what people are saying, sense the dynamic tensions in the group, and notice who's being heard and who's being marginalized. Only then can we begin to understand and have an impact on the broader organizations and societies of which we are a part.

Insight 3: Leadership Has a Purpose

Australian scholar Amanda Sinclair says that more thinking in the past 50 years has gone into how to do leadership than into what leadership is *for*. In her 2007 book, *Leadership for the Disillusioned*, she suggests that in our rush to build a leadership industry, we have forgotten to ask these essential questions: “What are the purposes to which leadership is being put? Who benefits from these purposes? Who or what may suffer or be adversely affected, perhaps in subtle and not immediately obvious ways?” (p. xvii).

When I first read these words, I realized I had never asked myself these questions. Like most in the leadership industry, my focus had been on the behaviors and practices of leadership, not on the purposes. What I’ve since discovered is that purpose is the central question of our work. An understanding of purpose brings clarity to any leadership challenge.

References:

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Martha Miser is founder and president of Aduro Consulting, LLC. Aduro Consulting, named for the Latin word meaning to “light” or “kindle,” specializes in leadership and change for purpose-driven companies, organizations that want to have an impact beyond the bottom line.

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