

**LEADERSHIP OBSERVED:  
ROLES, DECISIONS,  
CHARACTER, RELATIONSHIPS  
AND JOURNEYS**

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**Cunningham Lecture 2003**

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The subject of leadership can be approached in many different ways. How we approach leadership – who and what we choose to study, the activities and events we attempt to analyse, and the conceptual frameworks we use to understand leadership - determines what we see and therefore what is concluded. Who is a leader? How important are leaders? What difference do they make? What drives and motivates them? What makes a capable leader? What is the essence of effective leadership? How do we nurture leadership?

In a 1998 review of leadership theory and research it was observed that<sup>1</sup> 'most of the research on leadership during the past half century has been conducted in the United States, Canada and Western Europe.' In addition, it has been noted that 'almost all of the prevailing theories of leadership and about 98 per cent of the empirical evidence at hand, are distinctly American in character: individualistic rather than collectivistic, stressing follower responsibilities rather than rights...'.<sup>2</sup> But in many Asian countries there is a long tradition of writing about political, military, and spiritual leadership as well as a strong research interest in the moral dimension of leadership.<sup>3</sup> Rost, who conducted a historical review of the literature on leadership, concluded 'leadership... has come to mean many things to all people' and that 'scholars and practitioners of leadership are no more sure of what leadership is in 1990 than they were in 1930'.<sup>4</sup> While the diversity of views about leadership may indicate a field without direction, a more positive reading is that there are many valid ways to define, approach, and understand leadership and this testifies both to the complexity and the richness of the field.

**Five approaches to leadership**

The conceptual framework I use to study leadership draws upon five recurring themes in leadership writing and research. The five themes are:

- leadership as a set of roles, activities, and behaviours;
- leadership and crucial decisions;
- leaders and their personal characteristics and attributes;
- leadership as a set of vital social relationships; and finally,
- leadership as journey.

Some themes are broader in scope than others, and while the five themes touch on different aspects of leadership they, of course, overlap. I do not claim this is an exhaustive list of themes. It could be argued, for example, that one of the most important approaches to leadership is missing, namely, leadership as the exercise of

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authority, power, and influence. Thus, Rost writes that 'Influence is probably the word most often used in the leadership definitions of the 1980s' and Yukl maintains that '[M]ost definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people...'<sup>5</sup>

Some themes are dominant in western studies of leadership. For example, the study of leader characteristics and attributes is prominent in western research, perhaps because of the tendency to focus on the individual to explain social phenomena and the emphasis on assessment and selection of people with the 'right stuff' for leadership training and development. Other themes have received less attention - for example, the factors underpinning the nature and dynamics of leader-follower relationships, the theme of leadership career and of leadership as a personal and shared journey, and the study of leadership as the exercise of strategic decision making. I will return later to the theme of leadership as journey and discuss why it is a powerful entry point to the study of leadership.

The five approaches to leadership are equally relevant to the analysis of leadership at the top of organisations and institutions, but in this lecture will be illustrated by reference to team leaders, drawing on my own research.

There are many kinds of teams – for example, sales and marketing teams, hospital emergency teams, product development teams, search and rescue teams - and accordingly, many kinds of team leadership roles and tasks.<sup>6</sup> My specific interest is in Research and Development (R&D) teams<sup>7</sup> which include university research teams investigating the structure of brain cells, pharmaceutical development teams, and automobile product development teams. These teams are made up of scientists, technologists, engineers, and sometimes social scientists and other professionals who work on a new idea, concept, or product. The leader's role in R&D teams is to manage, coordinate, and motivate the team to produce creative and innovative work. The leadership task in R&D teams corresponds to what Kelley calls 'small-l leadership', as practised among peers.<sup>8</sup> 'Small-l' leaders manage their teams by working closely together with colleagues, gaining trust and respect, rather than by resorting to the exercise of power and authority. In contrast, 'large-L leadership', which is more strategic and direction setting, is found at the top of organisations in the form of senior executive teams, policy making groups, company boards, and so on.

The perspective taken makes a difference to what is studied – for example, the individual leader, or the relationship between leader and followers, or the nature of the task on which leaders are engaged. The themes also influence an understanding of the importance of leaders, the nature of leadership, and the lessons learned. For example, if leadership is essentially all about the leader's personal attributes, presumably there is not much interest in looking at what leaders do when interacting with peers and followers.

### **Application of the five themes in the study of team leaders**

Over the past decade I have been studying leadership of R&D project teams in Australian organisations, investigating the importance of the team leader for team performance and innovativeness, comparing new and experienced leaders. The Australian Research Council provided support for a project titled 'Effective R&D Project

Leaders', a longitudinal study of 29 new leaders and 29 experienced leaders, together with their teams. The ARC study involved leaders from four research organisations which differed in type of R&D performed. BHP Research carried out research on steel and aluminum products. ICI conducted research on paints and explosives. CSIRO, a publicly funded organisation, conducted research in areas such as forests, materials, water, information technology, plants, entomology, environment, and nutrition. DSTO, also a publicly funded organisation, conducted research on defence and surveillance systems, aeroplane and ship structures. When I began studying team leaders in the four research organisations there was no plan to examine leadership from five different themes or perspectives. But looking back, it is apparent that each of the five themes had an influence on the way I approached the study of team leaders. In the remainder of this lecture I draw on data and findings from the ARC study to illustrate the five themes and their application to the understanding of team leadership. Some of the findings have been published in journals, presented at conferences, and reported in *Leadership, Management, and Innovation in R&D Project Teams*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Leaders and activities/behaviours (roles)**

Defining leadership and classifying leader and manager roles according to the tasks and activities performed – that is, what leaders actually do – has a long tradition.<sup>10</sup> Senior leaders devise plans, make strategy, allocate resources, monitor organisational performance, handle disputes, and so on.

Four leader roles have been identified as important for R&D teams.<sup>11</sup> They are:

- as knowledge builder (provides scientific knowledge and expertise to the team);
- in stakeholder-liaison (coordinates the team's tasks with outside stakeholders who provide authority and resources to the team);
- as standards upholder (establishes standards and priorities); and
- as team builder (engages in activities to build relationships within the team).

The knowledge builder role is at the core of the team's task - bringing together the ideas, experience, and creativity of the team to discover new things, find solutions, design new products, and develop new knowledge. The leader does this by leading from the front, through his knowledge and expertise, by encouraging new approaches to problems, by encouraging team members to search widely for information and ideas. In a world in which information and knowledge are the keys to innovation and competitive advantage, leaders who are outstanding knowledge-builders are a precious human resource for their organisation.

The team builder role describes the task of creating a climate where team members have cordial relationships, trust each other, feel valued for their contributions, have some discretion in the way they perform their work and, importantly, feel free to express their ideas and opinions.

The stakeholder liaison role involves acting as the team's representative, ambassador, spokesman, and advocate for resources to the wider organisation and to the outside world. The term 'boundary spanning' describes the leader's liaison function in meeting with and briefing managers, customers, funding agencies, etc, about the team's work and its progress.

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The standards upholder role is a more routine leadership role which involves the leader in monitoring the team's work and ensuring that it complies with proper scientific, safety, environmental and ethical standards set down by the organisation and the industry.

The significance of the first three leadership roles - knowledge builder, team builder, and stakeholder liaison - is very evident from the study of team performance in the ARC study. All 58 leaders were rated by their teams on the Project Leader

Correlations between team leader role performance and project performance

Leader role performance (team-rated)	Project Performance as rated by:	
	Team (n = 52-54)	Customer (n = 25-27)
Knowledge Builder	.35**	.24
Stakeholder Liaison	.42**	.30
Standards Upholder	.05	-.12
Team Builder	.36**	.43*

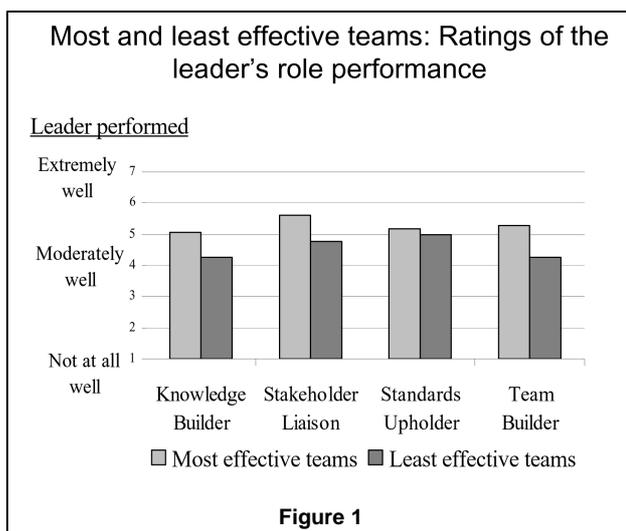
**Table 1**

Questionnaire<sup>12</sup> which measures leadership role performance. Leaders who performed well as knowledge builders, team builders, and in stakeholder liaison (as rated by members of their team) were in charge of teams whose project work was highly evaluated by customers and by team members themselves. Thus, the leader's standing as a knowledge builder, team builder, and in stakeholder liaison, was positively correlated with ratings of team performance - 0.35, 0.36, and 0.42 (using team member ratings) and 0.24, 0.43, and 0.30 (using customer ratings) (see Table 1). When the role profiles of leaders of the 16 best rated teams are compared with leaders of the 16 worst rated teams, the

superiority of the leaders of the best teams in the knowledge builder, team builder, and stakeholder liaison roles is readily apparent (see Figure 1).

Lee<sup>13</sup> has investigated the leader's role as a knowledge builder and knowledge sharer. She studied the effects of these two leadership roles and of trust in the leader on the

performance of 34 product development teams at Holden Engineering. Consistent with findings from the ARC study, she found that leaders who were highly rated as knowledge builders and knowledge sharers headed the best performing teams (r = 0.60).



The ARC study findings point to the significance of the leader's ability to perform a variety of roles. While some team leaders are good in all roles, many excel in only one role and lead with that strength. Their colleagues will cover for them and compensate for shortcomings as long as the leader is at least competent in the other roles. But team leaders weak in all roles are

leader is at least competent in the other roles. But team leaders weak in all roles are

considered 'passengers', and lose the respect of their colleagues - when that happens their team is heading for trouble, as we found in some teams in the ARC study.

### **Leadership and decision making**

Leading any organisation or project involves making strategic and consequential decisions, but, surprisingly, the links between leadership and decision making are under-developed in the research literature. There are some models linking leadership and decision making, such as Vroom and Yetton's (1973) normative decision model, Heller and Yukl's (1969) participative leadership model, Janis and Mann's (1977) conflict theory of decision making, and Janis's (1972) analysis of the vulnerability of policy-making groups to groupthink, a pattern of flawed thinking and decision making, due to leadership failure and conformity pressures.<sup>14</sup>

Leaders of project teams often face difficult decisions, for example, to abandon a procedure that has compromised months of research work, or to drop a veteran team member who is not performing. Perhaps the most important decision team leaders face is whether to fight to protect a cherished project that is encountering major difficulties and is consuming considerable time and resources. We found many examples in the ARC study of leaders who faced difficult decisions, and how they handled them had major consequences for their team and organisation.

An example of a leader whose flawed decision making had negative repercussions was 'Walt', the leader of the 'Pygmalion' project, which worked on a new process to remove impurities from compound substances. Walt was a new, inexperienced leader who was frustrated by what he considered unreasonable demands from the project customer. Walt, without consulting his manager and colleagues, decided to abandon the project about 6 months after it had begun. His precipitous decision meant that his team was left without a project to work on and the manager was left to deal with a political dispute and bitter recrimination between departments in the organisation.

A contrasting example was 'Terry', the new leader of the 'Geodiscovery' project, whose bold decision making had benefits for his team. Three years into the project and six months after Terry became leader, there was a crisis in the 'Geodiscovery' project. The complex working prototype at the heart of the project had failed a series of critical tests. Terry, who was not an expert in the field, had relied extensively on the advice of his senior team members, two of whom insisted that the problem could be fixed with additional time and resources. Terry's own inquiries led to a different conclusion - that the prototype was inherently flawed and therefore would continue to fail. Despite strong opposition, Terry, with the support of his manager, insisted on abandoning the prototype for a simpler approach. The 'Geodiscovery' team then made rapid progress and produced a simpler, successful prototype that was well received by the organisation.

We did not set out to study the decision making performance of leaders in the ARC study. But tracing the project journey of the 58 teams provided rich case examples of leaders making hard decisions in difficult situations, some of which saved their projects.

## **Leaders and their personal characteristics and attributes**

An interest in the personal attributes and characteristics of leaders has been a dominant theme in western models of leadership.<sup>15</sup> Stogdill<sup>16</sup> was an early proponent of this approach, which emphasises 'personal factors associated with leadership', and focuses on physical characteristics, such as height and appearance, and personality traits, such as self-confidence, high energy, assertiveness, and persistence. Hogan and others<sup>17</sup> examined the influence of personality in effectiveness of leaders. Little attention in Western research has been given to the moral dimension of leadership, although there are exceptions.<sup>18</sup> This contrasts with the emphasis by Chinese and other Asian researchers on the moral dimension of leadership and its significance for how subordinates evaluate their leaders.<sup>19</sup>

The leader-as-attributes approach is vulnerable to a fundamental attribution bias - a tendency to overestimate personal (internal) factors when judging others - and accordingly to give leaders too much credit for the successful performance of their organisation although many others have made that success possible. A more modern and sophisticated version of the leadership-as-attributes theme is the current interest in the 'emotional intelligence' of leaders, with its stress on self- and social awareness, empathy, and self-management.<sup>20</sup> Two important leader attributes are self-awareness and openness to learning. I will illustrate these attributes from the ARC study of R&D leaders.

### *Self-awareness: good calibration*

A high degree of self-awareness and self-management are among the characteristics of emotionally intelligent leaders. Self-awareness and self-monitoring are twin aspects of being alert to one's strengths and weaknesses and also to social cues and the impact one has on others.<sup>21</sup> We all know of people in leadership positions who are totally oblivious to the consequences of their behaviour on others and how they are regarded by others.

One test of self-awareness is whether there is close agreement between how the leader thinks he is performing and how his followers think he is performing. We have data on 47 team leaders in the ARC study and how they rated themselves on transformational leadership and how their team colleagues rated them (see table 2). We found that approximately half of the team leaders (53 per cent) were well-calibrated ie, how they saw themselves was matched by how their team members saw them. But 30 per cent had an *inflated* view of their leadership style not shared by their team members. Interestingly, 17 per cent of team leaders had a *deflated* view of themselves; ie, they had a lower opinion of their leadership ability than their team members.

The over-estimators or self-inflated leaders are an interesting group because they are out of touch with the reality of how they were regarded by their teams, and in some cases strikingly so. For example, two quite inexperienced leaders regarded themselves as outstanding transformational leaders while their team members regarded them as disappointing failures. An extreme gap or discrepancy between self and other assessment is a sign of trouble.

Evidence from the ARC study shows that customers of teams in which the leader had an inflated self-view tended to have a low opinion of the team and its work As Table 2

shows, leaders who are well-calibrated (ie, evaluate themselves similarly to how they are evaluated by others) have, in the opinion of customers, better performing teams (4.17) than leaders who have an inflated view of their leadership style (3.50). Interestingly, the humble leaders who do not think very highly of themselves have, in the opinion of customers, very good teams. This is an intriguing finding and merits further attention. Perhaps these humble leaders are more liked and respected because they are modest. Also, most of the humble leaders were highly experienced leaders and it is likely that they set much higher standards when they evaluate themselves.

Self-Other agreement: Leaders and their team members' ratings of transformational leadership			
	Transformational leadership (7-point scale)	Transformational leadership (7-point scale)	Project team performance (5-point scale)
Self-Other Agreement	Leader-rated	Team-member rated	Customer-rated
Over-estimators (n = 14)	5.89	4.20	3.50
In agreement (n = 25)	5.31	5.23	4.17
Under-estimators (n = 8)	4.13	5.61	4.50

**Table 2**

#### Leader learning

Another important characteristic of excellent team leaders is their openness to learning. Even the most experienced leaders learn from the work they do. Indeed, if you are permitted only one question when interviewing a prospective team leader, a good question to ask is: 'How much have you learned over the past four months from the work you do?' That question was asked of the sample of team leaders in the ARC study every four months. We found that leaders who reported they learned 'a great deal' were among the very best leaders, while those who reported 'not much' were among the worst. Both new and experienced leaders continue to learn how to manage people, teams and projects, how to deal with customers and other stakeholders, how their organisation works, and they learn new scientific and technical knowledge that helps advance successful completion of the project.

Hirst *et al*<sup>22</sup> found, as expected, that new leaders tend to report they have learned more than experienced leaders. New leaders who reported they learned a great deal headed projects highly regarded by their customers (r=0.59). Consistent with that finding, it was found that for the new leaders the amount of self reported learning had a significant impact on their subsequent facilitative leadership style and team performance 8 and 12 months later.

The areas where the leader's self-reported learning seems to make most difference to team performance are learning about team management, learning how to deal with external stakeholders, and learning about their organisation. This makes sense. The team's prospects are bound to improve if the leader is continually learning how to manage teams, deal with customers and other stakeholders, and knowing more about how the organisation functions.

Why are leaders who report they learn a great deal associated with the best performing teams? I suggest that such leaders have a strong 'learning orientation'.<sup>23</sup> They are open to new ideas, they inspire colleagues; they find new insights in events frequently

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unnoticed by others; they learn from experience, and I speculate they are also good teachers, describing the things they have learned.

#### *Transformational leadership style*

The concept of transformational leadership<sup>24</sup> sits somewhat awkwardly in the five themes framework as it belongs to both the leader-attributes perspective and the concept of leadership as a relationship. The transformational style of leadership - based on a close, personalised relationship with followers - inspires team members about the importance of their work and motivates them to strive for outstanding results and performance. It has been found that transformational leaders are more trusted, are more respected in the knowledge building and team building roles, and are also more self-aware – that is, more in touch with how others see them.<sup>25</sup>

The transformational leadership style makes a difference in both direct and indirect ways. We found in the ARC study that transformational leaders help buffer the team from the adverse effects of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.<sup>26</sup> They also foster a team climate that encourages innovative team performance.<sup>27</sup> An interesting finding is that the positive effects of transformational leadership on innovative team performance were especially evident in teams led by new leaders, and consistent with other findings<sup>28</sup> the correlation between transformational leadership and project performance was stronger in fundamental research teams ( $r=0.68$ ) than in product development teams ( $r=0.40$ ). This demonstrates how different leadership styles may be needed for different projects or tasks. 'Blue-sky' fundamental or basic research is more challenging and risky than the more routine product development research - there is a higher likelihood of failure. An inspiring transformational leader may be needed to help the team meet the challenge of a complex, fundamental research project.

### **Leadership as relationships**

Leadership is essentially a relationship between the leader and followers. While the leader-follower dyad dominates the 'relationship' theme, there is now greater attention to 'relational leadership' in which the focus is widened to the concept of shared leadership in teams, groups, and organisations.<sup>29</sup> Other perspectives include that of Greenleaf<sup>30</sup> whose ideas helped challenge the traditional view of leadership as controlling and influencing followers and raised the idea of leaders who want to serve people.

The Western emphasis on social influence in leadership<sup>31</sup> has led to study of different types of power that leaders use to influence followers and others. Yukl<sup>32</sup> writes: 'The effectiveness of a manager (leader) depends on several types of power *relationships* [italics added] including the downward power of the leader over subordinates, the upward power of subordinates over the leader, the upward power of the leader over superiors, and the lateral power of the leader over other people in the organisation'.

Some western models of the leader-follower relationship point to an exchange arrangement involving obligations, favours, and commitments (see especially the concept of transactional leadership<sup>33</sup>). Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory<sup>34</sup> describes how different exchange relationships emerge between leaders and specific subordinates (note the term 'subordinate'). The basic premise is that leaders usually

establish a special exchange relationship with a small number of trusted subordinates (the 'in group') who function as assistants, lieutenants, or advisors. The exchange relationship established with the remaining subordinates (the 'out group') is substantially different. This is a highly instrumental view of leadership based on the premise that the leader provides selected followers with tangible rewards, more pay, a larger office, better promotion opportunities, and favours in exchange for the follower's greater commitment, loyalty, and support. The relevance of leader-member exchange theory to leader-follower relationships in Asian societies is now an active research topic.

*A matter of trust*

The follower's trust in the leader is central to the leader-follower relationship. Gillespie and Mann<sup>35</sup> examined the importance of trust in the leader for team climate and team performance in the ARC study. They reported that trust in the leader is based on two components:

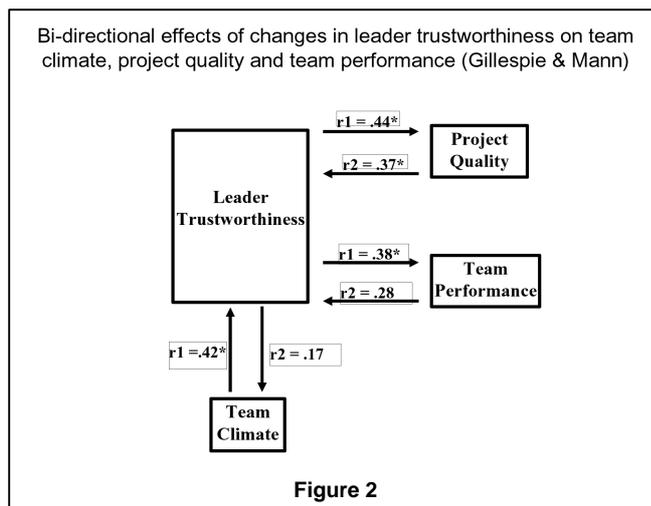
- a belief in the competence and reliability of the leader, and
- recognition that the leader is willing to share vital information and keep personal confidences.

Most team leaders in the ARC study were trusted, but not all. Lack of trust was mainly due to doubts about the leader's competence and reliability rather than concerns about disclosure of personal confidential information.

The competence-reliability aspect of trust is a fundamental aspect of the leader-follower relationship. Leaders who are incompetent and unreliable are not trusted because they compromise the reputation of the team and seriously jeopardise its performance. Thus, the most trusted leaders were rated significantly more highly by team members on all four leadership roles - knowledge builder, team builder, stakeholder liaison, and standards upholder - and on transformational leadership.

Trust in the leader tends to fluctuate over time – it waxes and wanes with the perceived competence of the leader.

Gillespie and Mann investigated the dynamic relationship between fluctuations in trust in the leader, positive team climate, and good team performance. For example, they asked whether there is evidence that team climate becomes more positive and team performance improves as a new leader becomes more trusted by the team. This idea was tested by examining whether an increase in trust in the leader over time (eight months) had a subsequent



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positive effect on team climate and team performance four months later. Analysing data from the ARC study, it was found that an increase in leader trustworthiness indeed had a subsequent impact on team climate ( $r=0.42$ ) and on team performance ( $r=0.38$ ) (see Figure 2). Consistent with the idea that leaders become more trusted when their team is performing well, it was also found that an increase in team performance over time was followed months later by an increase in trust in the leader. ( $r=0.28$ ).<sup>36</sup> Gillespie<sup>37</sup> also interviewed team leaders at CSIRO for her doctoral research and reported what many team leaders say they do to establish and maintain trust. The four most common practices were to: demonstrate competence in the leadership role; be open and honest; act with integrity by keeping promises and commitments; and, get to know team members personally. All four practices are expressions of the two principal components of trust - competence/reliability and sharing/disclosure.

#### *Other relationships*

While the leader-follower relationship is the central focus in studies of leadership,<sup>38</sup> there are other important relationships to be analysed, for instance the bond between leaders and their teachers and mentors, between leaders and other leaders in the organisation, and between leaders and their parents, families, and friends. Accordingly, Drath's concept of relational leadership and his call for greater attention to shared leadership in groups, teams, and organisations is important.<sup>39</sup>

### **Leadership as journey**

Finally, we come to the theme of leadership as journey. This theme has two related aspects - leadership as personal growth and development, and leadership as guiding a shared project to a valuable goal and conclusion.

The concept of the personal leadership journey is a way of describing the careers and development of leaders who have been influential through their ideas, decisions, and actions. The perspective is essentially psychological and developmental as it traces the early development and formative experiences of future leaders as a key to their ideas and commitment to a cause or ideology. While research at the Center for Creative Leadership<sup>40</sup> examines the effect of hardships and other experiences on leader development, there have not been, to my knowledge, systematic longitudinal studies of leaders tracing their development and how they learn, change, and grow over time, or for that matter lose their way and decline.

Bennis and Thomas<sup>41</sup> refer to 'leadership crucibles', formative experiences that shape the leaders' values, their concept of what constitutes leadership, and their readiness to take on the challenge of leadership. Writers taking this perspective refer to childhood experiences and identity formation in adolescence and early adulthood as a key to leadership mission and values. Examples include Eric Erikson (1969) writing about Mahatma Gandhi and Howard Gardner (1995) writing about Martin Luther King.<sup>42</sup> Gandhi's experience with personal discrimination as a young Indian lawyer in South Africa was crucial in forming his decision to become a leader and advocate for his people in India. Che Guevara's *Motorcycle Diaries*, a record of his eight month trip through South America in 1952 when he was 24 years old, describes the impact of observing abject poverty and discrimination.<sup>43</sup> This experience seems to have initiated

his change of purpose and direction, so that he left medical studies and, ultimately, became a revolutionary.

Second, leadership as journey invokes the concept of the leader at the head of a challenging project that must overcome hazards and hardships before reaching a highly valued goal or destination. This meaning captures the idea of the leader together with others on a lengthy mission to discover something, change something, or make a difference to other people's lives.

Among the most compelling stories of epic leadership are those of brave explorers and emergent political leaders at the head of difficult, path-breaking projects. A striking example is the race in 1911 between a British team led by Robert Falcon Scott and a Norwegian team led by Roald Amundsen to be the first to reach the South Pole. Amundsen's precise and strategic planning led to success and the safe return of his team, while Scott's flawed leadership contributed to the death of all members of the team who perished on the return journey from the Pole. The story of Scott and Amundsen is compelling because it contrasts the stark difference between successful and failed leaders and how the leader's preparation and aptitude for a hazardous journey can spell the difference between survival and death. Closer to home, the flawed leadership of Robert O'Hara Burke, who together with William Wills led the first expedition to cross Australia from south to north in 1860-1861, provides a similar lesson of how reckless and imprudent leaders can kill themselves and their colleagues.<sup>44</sup>

In China, the concept of inspiring leader and journey is evoked by the epic Long March, in which Mao Zedong led his followers to a secure base in Yanan, a journey of over 8000 kilometers which began in 1934 and lasted for almost a year. However, a recent book by Chang and Halliday<sup>45</sup> debunks many aspects of the Mao legend and his conduct during the Long March. Other political and historical leaders who led their people on long journeys include Moses and the Hebrews in the Sinai desert, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers in 1930 on the 300 mile Salt March in defiance of the British government's salt tax, and Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights marches in the US in the 1960s. The stories of these journeys led by political and spiritual leaders have taken on a larger than life, mythical quality.

On a modest scale, the ARC study of R&D team leaders touches on both meanings of the theme of leadership as journey.

#### *Leadership development.*

The ARC study design included a comparison between 29 new leaders at the beginning of their career and 29 seasoned, experienced leaders. The idea was to examine the magnitude of difference in leadership capabilities and performance produced by experience. Unexpectedly, we found *on average* only small differences between new leaders and experienced leaders in capabilities, style and performance. But there was a striking finding. Most of the approximately 20 per cent of teams in the ARC study that struggled and performed poorly were led by new, inexperienced leaders.<sup>46</sup>

*Shared journey*

The ARC study used a longitudinal design to track teams and their leaders over one year with follow up interviews 18 months later. Some of the teams had been together for almost 10 years and many had projects that took years to complete. R&D projects are like a journey of many stages with milestones to be met and obstacles to be overcome. Throughout the different phases of a project there are changes in the kind of work done - from more routine to more creative - and also fluctuations in the teams' rate of progress and achievements. The key point is that sustained leadership is necessary to steer the project and team through a long and often difficult journey.

*The project journey*

We asked leaders to reconstruct progress made and obstacles encountered by their team during the year of the ARC study. An example is Dr Lazor ('Laz') Strezov, leader of Project M, a team at BHP Research which worked for eight years on a revolutionary technology for casting super-thin steel strips from molten steel. Figure 3 shows Laz's reconstruction of progress and obstacles in Project M's journey during 1997. At the beginning of 1997, progress to objectives was rated at 10 per cent, then 35 per cent at mid year, before dropping back to 10 per cent in June because of disappointing results from the first trials of the thin strip process in a commercial plant. A change in project objectives was then decided to simplify the thin strip casting process. The changes seem to have worked, as progress rose to 90 per cent by the end of 1997. Corresponding to fluctuations in progress there were obstacles, which were significant in the first half of the year and peaked at 'very significant' in mid year.

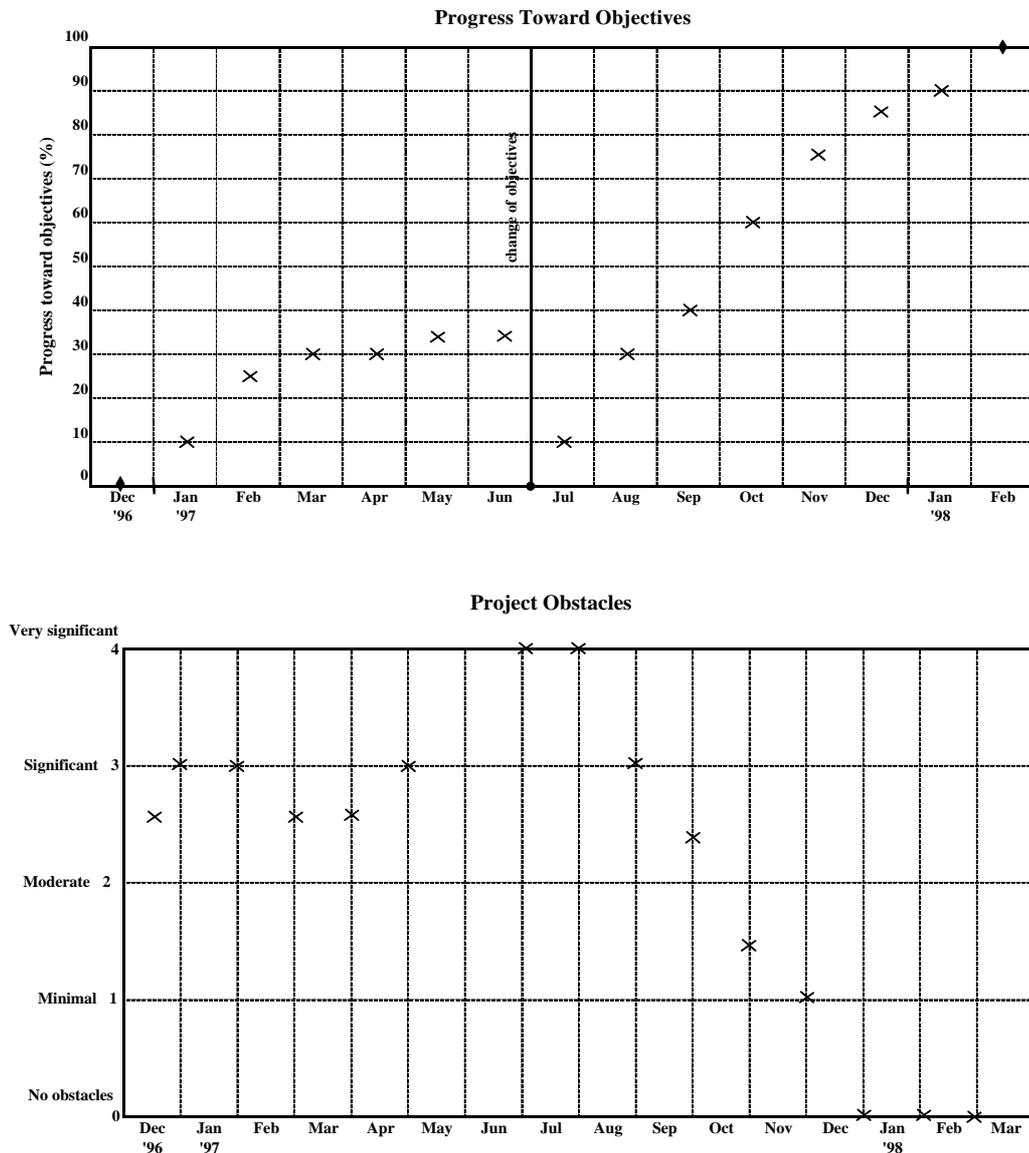
Most leaders reported encountering obstacles during the project journey.<sup>47</sup> Fifty per cent of teams experienced technical problems (as in the case of Project M), 44 per cent had funding and resource shortages, 44 per cent lack of suitable staff, and 33 per cent reported difficult and strained relationships between team members and with stakeholders. Some teams had to deal with multiple, persistent obstacles. When a team encounters obstacles it often produces a sharp deterioration in team climate. Team members become demoralised and tend to blame one another; communication breaks down, and team performance begins to suffer. However, it was found that many teams overcame obstacles, maintained team morale, and completed their project successfully.<sup>48</sup> The key is how the team leader responds to the obstacles. Team leaders who are transformational and facilitative in their leadership style - they work hard to reinforce important goals, inspire team members to believe that worthwhile goals can still be attained, and involve team members in finding solutions to problems - are able to maintain a positive team climate and, in turn, achieve good outcomes. Thus, transformational and facilitative leaders protect their teams and counteract the otherwise debilitating effects of setbacks and obstacles during the project journey. Laz Strezov of BHP Research is a prime example of a transformational and facilitative leader who helped steer his team and its project through a very difficult period during its long, eight year journey.

**Which are the most compelling approaches?**

In sum, the five themes offer a framework for studying different aspects of leaders and leadership. They are all useful and together help build a more complete picture of the

task of leaders and the nature of leadership. It is interesting that although not planned, the five themes together cover much of the relevant issues managers raise about the performance of team leaders and their importance for innovative project work. But three questions remain as we ask whether this analysis of five themes is useful for the study of leadership.

Figure 3. Project journey: Laz Strezov's reconstruction of progress of Project M, 1986-1997.



### **Cunningham Lecture, 2003**

*Do these themes correspond to how people think of leadership?*

When I invite people in western audiences to indicate which theme most closely fits their concept of leadership (or for that matter whether they have a totally different concept), most choose the theme of a leader's characteristics and attributes. In contrast, in group-oriented cultures, such as China and Japan, I expect that the themes of leadership-as-relationship and leadership as journey would be chosen in keeping with traditional writings on the lives of popular historical figures and military heroes and on the central role of relationships in family, work, and community.

The journey theme is compelling because it evokes two powerful ideas: first, the impact of family, teachers, community, character-forming experiences, and life-altering historical events on the leader's values and interests; and second, the significance and nature of the project on which the leader is engaged with his team of followers. Genuine leaders are trying to create something valuable or to change an unsatisfactory situation. What is this project? And what makes it so valuable that people are prepared to give years of effort and sacrifice? When that question is asked the importance of studying leaders engaged with others in challenging, difficult work and what enables them to succeed when others fail becomes obvious. And there are clear implications for the research approach and methodologies that should be taken, for example, an emphasis on studying emergent, appointed or elected leaders in genuine leadership settings, and a low priority on studies of so-called leaders assigned to that role in contrived laboratory situations.

*Can we simplify the five approaches? Are they all distinct?*

It can be argued that some themes belong together with other approaches. For example, the themes of character and relationships are linked in some analyses of leadership. For instance Little<sup>49</sup> compared the personalities of two Australian Prime Ministers, Hawke and Keating, and maintained that Hawke needed the adulation of the crowd, while Keating saw himself as superior to the crowd. On the other hand, decision making can be seen as a leadership role and also as part of the theme of leadership journey, as influential people make crucial decisions throughout their careers.<sup>50</sup>

It can also be argued that leadership as journey underpins all themes; the personal journey encompasses the theme of individual differences in leader attributes, values, self-awareness and learning - and how these characteristics change and mature over time as new leaders become more experienced leaders.

In parallel, leadership as shared journey encompasses the remaining themes of leadership roles, decision making, and building and maintaining social relationships, especially trust, to complete a valuable project. Consistent with this idea, it has been found that the leader's performance as knowledge builder, team builder, and particularly, in stakeholder liaison, was most significant for team performance at the late, concluding phases of a project.<sup>51</sup> The importance of highlighting and applying different leadership roles at different stages of a project is indicated by these findings.

*Is each theme understood in the same way across cultures?*

The 2003 ASSA Symposium, held with colleagues from the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils, focused on 'Youth in Transition'. The symposium theme reminds us of two matters highly relevant to the study of leadership: first, that

leadership, as with all human endeavour, is culture bound; and second, that the challenge and task of leadership is influenced by era and generation.

Some leadership themes may be interpreted differently across cultures. For example, the leader-attributes and relationships themes may have different meanings. Hui and Tan, for instance, point out that moral character has been a major criterion for Chinese leadership since historic times and that an emphasis on the leader's 'moral integrity' is a feature of how leaders are evaluated in all Chinese communities.<sup>52</sup>

In the GLOBE project<sup>53</sup> the major study of leadership worldwide, the central question is the extent to which specific leader attributes and leadership behaviours are seen to contribute to effective leadership - and whether these attributes and behaviours are universally endorsed across cultures. This is an implicit leadership theory, as it concerns the beliefs and assumptions that people have about the characteristics that distinguish effective and ineffective leaders and moral and immoral leaders. The GLOBE study, based on samples of middle managers from 60 different countries who were asked to endorse what they believe are the facilitators of effective leadership, found that most leadership attribute dimensions apply across cultures, but some dimensions, for example, self-protective (self-centered, loner, evasive) and autonomous (independent, individualistic) vary by culture.

#### *Leadership as a function of era and generation*

The concept of leadership is also changing under the impact of many forces, including generational changes in values and attitudes toward authority, concepts of loyalty, connections between people in virtual and internet communities, and changing expectations about work, employment, and career. Old traditions and values are under challenge through the opening up of international contacts, globalisation, and economic integration. Large, stable, conservative, hierarchical organisations are being replaced by small, dynamic, team-based organisations that produce new knowledge and services. The leadership challenge in these two contrasting types of organisation is quite different. The changes are paralleled by the emergence of a new generation of better educated young people who are more willing to accept leaders who have vision and credibility, and who use the power of ideas and rational persuasion, and to reject autocrats who rely on position and coercion to secure compliance and maintain direction. In general, youth in transition from old worlds to new ones expect to be led differently and, in the fullness of time, to lead differently.

It is evident that youth, at least in the West, have become sceptical about political leaders and have very few political heroes. A study of geeks and geezers found that the 18 'geeks' (US 25 year olds who had become business leaders) when asked about personal heroes produced only 15 names between them - the most frequent were their parents (8) then a friend or colleague (3). Not one US president or political leader was mentioned. Six geeks ignored the question altogether.<sup>54</sup> Closer to home, a poll of 'admired heroes' of the entering class of 133 Master of Business Administration students at the University of Melbourne in 2003 was topped by Nelson Mandela (6), Mahatma Gandhi (4), Pope John Paul (4) and Warren Buffet (4). With the exception of Steven Waugh, the (then) captain of the Australian Cricket team who received three votes, no Australian polled more than one vote. The paucity of admired leaders from the ranks of national and political leaders in the US and Australia is a sad reflection on how little they inspire the next generation.

### ***Cunningham Lecture, 2003***

Finally, the occasion of the Cunningham Lecture, named in honour of Kenneth Cunningham who served as the first President of the Social Science Research Council which became the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, is an opportunity to recognise the leadership provided by our own Fellowship. Many ASSA Fellows have led the way on social, political, legal, community, and of course academic issues. At the Raheen Dinner in July 2003, three Fellows, Zelman Cowen, Ninian Stephen, and William Deane - were honoured by our Academy for their exceptional contribution as Governors General of Australia and for their outstanding legal careers. I also note the 'ideas leadership' of Michael Kirby, Anthony Mason, Fiona Stanley, Robert Manne, Paul Kelly, Marcia Langton, Hugh Stretton, Peter Karmel and Barry Jones, among many other Fellows, and how their ideas have helped shape how we see Australia and its future.

### **Conclusion**

The study of leadership is informed by five themes that comprise a framework for examining leaders in a range of roles, activities and behaviours, their decision making, personal characteristics and values, types of relationships, and the formative events and experiences they have shared with others, while tackling challenging projects. Different perspectives have been examined by drawing on an empirical study of 58 research and development teams and their leaders in Australian organisations. Each perspective helps explicate leadership factors in the performance of R&D teams engaged in innovative work.

I conclude with four brief suggestions for future research. First, it is important to be alert to the level of leadership being considered when examining the nature of leadership. While drawing on the literature across various levels of leadership, the research used in this paper is limited to team leaders who are at the lower and middle levels in organisations. It is important to test whether the five themes are equally relevant and useful in examining leadership at more senior levels. The theme of leadership as strategic decision making would, I suggest, become more important at the senior level. Second, it is important to consider the wider network of key relationships that sustain and support leaders.<sup>55</sup> Third, it is important to attend to the longitudinal aspect of leadership development and discovery as expressed in the theme of the leadership journey. This is crucial for understanding readiness to take on and relinquish leadership, the interest in leading diverse projects and tasks, and how leaders mature and change. The leadership-as-journey theme also underpins the analysis of changing roles, personal attributes, and crucial decisions over time. The implication for learning about leaders over a career of leadership activity is obvious. Finally, it is important to attend to cultural differences and similarities in the meaning of leadership whether in regard to preferred leader characteristics, the nature of the leader-follower relationship, or the kinds of leaders who are recognised and respected for their service and contribution in their respective communities.



**Professor Leon Mann, FASSA, is immediate past President of The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.**

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