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The Phantom of the Omniscient Leader

Review of 'Leader thinking skills: Capacities for contemporary leadership'
by Michael D. Mumford & C. A. Higgs, editors

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Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things. – Peter Drucker, found online at https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/peter_drucker_131069?src=t_leadership

If you go around asking people to name a great leader – I tried – you will find that many struggle to find an answer. Certain politicians may come to mind, generals, and perhaps tycoons of industry, but the pickings are slim. Yet everyone is surrounded by leaders, or people who claim to be. For organizational psychology, it is one of the field's great missions to articulate what a leader is, and especially what a *great* leader is. Even the first part of this mission is hard because it requires a conceptual analysis of 'leader' and how this concept can be distinguished – in the business context – from the related concepts of 'entrepreneur,' 'executive,' and 'manager.' There is a cultural and folk psychological bias to construe the figure of the leader in a positive light (Meindl, 1990). Great leaders, we imagine, transcend their egos and advance the collective good, or at least the well-being of their ingroup. Another difficulty arises when we contemplate the significant leaders in history. Should our evaluation be affected by how their journey ended? Many leaders were revered by the people they led at the time, but it didn't end well for all of them. Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo, and died on the remote Island of St. Helena. From a contemporary liberal perspective, it is repugnant to consider dictators like Hitler, Stalin, or Mao great leaders even though they commanded the adoration and obedience of millions for a time. During their days of success, these tyrants were described with the attributes associated with transformative leadership. How will history judge today's leaders? It is difficult to make disinterested forecasts. Most observers will project their own current evaluations when trying to predict the judgments of future historians (Krueger, 2000).

Despite these difficulties, organizational psychology must accept the task of peeling this onion, and to propose and test theories that describe the psychological attributes and

capacities of great leaders, and to help overcome simplistic and overly emotional folk assessments. There is too much at stake. If leaders have a disproportionate impact on the well-being of corporations, institutions, and societies at large, science must try to get a fix on how they do it if they do it well.

In their edited volume of 14 chapters, Mumford and Higgs and their contributors review much of the latest research on leaders' cognition, and they advisedly refer to thinking *skills*, thus alluding to the idea that great leadership is, in part, a type of expertise that can be acquired with hard work, persistence, and the knowledge of where to invest the effort. In short, Mumford and Higgs' project is to show that great leadership can be understood through the lens of the psychology of expertise (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). This perspective is constructive in that it sets aside the simplistic view that great leaders emerge thanks to their charisma, which is a property that we might think we know when we see it, but otherwise fail to explain it. If great leadership can be characterized by a bundle of attainable skills, then there is hope for aspiring individuals, and there is hope for groups and organizations that certain individuals can be found, trained, and coached into an elite class of great leaders so that everyone may benefit.

Most of the chapters fall into this mold, with one notable exception. Antonakis, Simonton, and Wai (chapter 1) present a powerful counterpoint right at the start. These authors focus on psychology's central measurable construct: psychometric intelligence. The IQ, having survived many detractors, predicts a wealth of desirable outcomes, and effective leadership is one of them. Antonakis and colleagues report that as life and work challenges become more complex – as they tend to do in contexts of great responsibility – the predictive power of the IQ even increases. They further support this conclusion with historiometric

analyses where the intelligence of deceased leaders is estimated from available records. Another finding, which turns out to be relevant for the book project as a whole, is that at very high levels of intelligence, the effectiveness of leadership drops off. There are several good reasons for this decline, and the most compelling is that some highly intelligent leaders are not the most skilled communicators vis-à-vis followers who are less intelligent or educated. Of course, this argument can be turned around to say that being able to find the best register of communication is a sign of social intelligence, and therefore these high-IQ leaders are missing a facet of a broader concept of intelligence. In an unusual move, Antonakis added an appendix to their chapter to confront this very argument. They show that various tests of social or emotional intelligence are correlated with effective leadership, but these correlations vanish when the good old IQ is statistically controlled. This is bad news for some cottage industrialists, including those who seek salvation in broad and high-minded concepts such as wisdom (as does Sternberg in chapter 14).

The Antonakis chapter is an overture to what should be the meat of the expertise narrative. Intelligence, though somewhat malleable, still has the conceptual and empirical status of a stable individual difference characteristic. So what are the thinking skills beyond trait intelligence that make for good leadership, and how can they be perfected? Chapters 2 to 13 tackle a variety of issues, such problem-solving (Caughron et al.; Medeiros et al.), causal analysis (Petersen), information selection (Mumford et al.), attention (Combe & Carrington; Zaccaro & Torres; Day et al.), processing capacity (Lord; Kwan et al.), forecasting (Mumford et al.), and mental models (Paoletti et al.). This list amounts to pretty much a full suite of cognitive capacities desirable for anyone who seeks to live well.

The expertise paradigm assumes that great leaders can solve problems, extract causes from messy information, select the best information, possess and use ample processing capacity, and make accurate forecasts. This one-sentence summary of over 300 pages of text is Spartan and it may seem unfair, but herein lies the book's chief shortcoming. With all the references to complexity, contextuality, and instability of the leader's world, an audience of leaders or aspiring leaders will struggle to find a useful message. This is ironic because in the world of business leaders, the concepts of the bottom line and actionable deliverables have strong currency. The chapters rather read as if they were written for academics, and so they can only be evaluated in academic terms.

Most chapters raise difficult questions. One challenge is to figure out whether there is anything special about leadership. Are these cognitive skills the kinds of skills that any person might wish to develop? If so, then this is not really a book on leadership. There might be elements in the book that uniquely focus on great leaders, but they are hard to find and easy to forget. One pervasive strategy in the reviewed research is to do simulation studies, where respondents – who are often undergraduate students – imagine they are leaders when performing reasoning tasks. In the chapter on forecasting (chapter 8), for example, Mumford et al. write that “some 160 undergraduates were asked to assume the role of a manager (e.g. [*sic*] a leader” (p. 217). Many of the reviewed studies follow the same script, which raises the possibility that it might be sufficient to ask the respondents to imagine they are cognitively circumspect, thorough, and responsible individuals, and one might find the same results. The presumed uniqueness of leaders' cognition thus remains underspecified. Also notice that in this research, the conceptual differences between ‘leaders’ and ‘managers’ are being dismissed. A related problem with the simulation approach is that it cannot – by definition –

tap into high-level skills that are difficult to attain. Surely, the lesson cannot be that leaders should imagine themselves to be leaders before making decisions.

Another challenge is that too little is said about *exformation*, or a leader's understanding or what to ignore or which decision problems to approach heuristically instead of algorithmically (Nørretranders, 1998). The tenor of most chapters is that more is more, and that the great leader's expertise will approximate omniscience. Time and again, authors stress the need the leaders' need for complex mental models, sensitivity to context, and mindfulness of complexity. It is a lot to ask, and this high demand invites the breakdown of the leader-as-expert model. The core difficulty is that theories of expertise were developed to explain exceptional performance in tightly defined domains such as playing chess or a musical instrument (Chase & Simon, 1973). In these contexts, sustained practice at the edge of one's ability eventually yields the precious fruit of world-class performance. In broad, ill-defined, and shifting domains, the expertise paradigm cannot work, and it was never meant to. There have been attempts, but they failed.

In the late 1980s, Paul Baltes and his team at the Max-Planck Institute in Berlin placed high hopes in an expert model of wisdom (Baltes & Smith, 2008). The model had five facets on which nominated individuals as well as controls could be scored. In most studies, the nominated wise did not outperform the controls, nor did the old outperform the young. This situation with leadership is analogous. Much like wisdom, effective leadership in its generic form does not unfold in a domain where cognitive expertise can find traction. The expert model is more promising for executive and lower-echelon managers.

The vision of the leader as an *Überexpert* is a false ideal, an ideal with religious overtones. At the limit, the cognitively super-skilled individual becomes god-like. The

Abrahamic (and Christian) god is omnipotent, omnipresent, fierce but merciful, and also omniscient. The faithful will not hesitate to nominate God (or Jesus) as the ideal leader. Freud (1955) recognized the connection between the psychology of religion and the psychology of the group when he portrayed God as the primal leader that humans have extracted from experience and projected to the supernatural sphere. Again, a more fruitful route for research is to focus on what leaders choose to ignore (Hertwig & Engel, 2016), how they solve problems under uncertainty with simple heuristics (Gigerenzer, 2008), and how they manage to efficiently delegate (Murnighan, 2012). Such a research program would be a significant departure from the ‘maximize-cognitive-skills’ perspective championed in the Mumford-and-Higgs volume.

One of the chapters does not align with the omniscience narrative. This is Gronn’s (chapter 10) attempt to make sense of leaders’ sense-making. The fact that humans are tireless sense-makers has perhaps been too obvious all along to receive focused research attention. In psychology, theories of cognitive consistency (Heider, 1958) have traditionally approached this issue narrowly, but a broader research agenda is now emerging. Chater and Loewenstein (2016), for example, postulate a drive for sense-making, a drive that affects both low-level perception and higher-order information management, and that in its power “is analogous to better known drives such as hunger, thirst and sex” (p. 137). It will be fascinating to see how researchers (and their respondents) deal with the conflicting demands of rationality and the sheer desire to perceive meaning, any meaning. If leaders are the group’s chief sense-makers, they find themselves in possession of a great power tool. They can craft visions for the future by constructing plausible narratives from scraps of experience and creative imagination. Doing so effectively is a cognitive skill, and it is orthogonal,

perhaps antithetical, to all-knowing expertise. Indeed, Chater and Loewenstein (2016) link the capacity of sense-making to the capacity for judicious information avoidance, also known as deliberate ignorance (Krueger, Hahn, Ellerbrock, Gächter, Hertwig, Kornhauser, Leuker, Szech, & Waldmann, in press). With more research attention to leaders' sense-making activities, we may gain a clearer picture of why we love some leaders and loathe others. Knowledge of their IQ and problem-solving skills will be good to have but far from sufficient.

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, a Prussian field marshal and hero of successful campaigns against Denmark, Austria, and France, was a great leader. His thinking of strategy took the *omni* out and left the *science*. No strategic plan, he argued, survives the first contact with the enemy's main force. After that, great leaders acknowledge uncertainty yet act decisively. This is a state of affairs that makes the study of the requisite cognitive skills very difficult. Mumford, Higgs, and their fellow authors describe what they have learned, but a leader seeking guidance in their work runs a risk of paralysis.

The opening observation that ordinary people struggle to name great leaders finds a reflection in Mumford and Higgs. There are very few illustrative case descriptions, and most of these are bad. Lord (chapter 2) introduces Sully Sullenberger and his co-pilot as experts, made famous by their daring landing on the Hudson River in 2009. Their skill shows expertise in Simon's and Ericsson's sense; it says little about leadership. Things then go from bad to worse. Madeiros et al. (chapter 7) recall the misadventure of Crystal Pepsi, and blame then-CEO David Novak for not thinking creatively enough. Tam et al. (chapter 9) single out Hillary Clinton for voting for the invasion of Iraq after failing to see through fraudulent intelligence. Sternberg (chapter 14), to his credit, does not mince his words. Calling unwise

leaders toxic, he condemns – rightfully so – the lot of Hitler and Stalin and their petty emulators Maduro, Orban, and Mugabe. By this point, we have come a long way: from the contemplation of great leaders’ special cognitive gifts to the contemplation of the contemptible. It takes little cognitive skill to do the latter. The book would have benefitted from a few worked-out examples. Aspiring leaders want role models.

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