

ROBERT A. CAMPBELL



GOVERNANCE
AND SOCIAL
LEADERSHIP

Governance and Social Leadership

Robert A. Campbell

CAPE BRETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
SYDNEY, NOVA SCOTIA

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Cape Breton University Press recognizes the support of the Province of Nova Scotia, through the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage and the support received for its publishing program from the Canada Council for the Arts Block Grants Program. We are pleased to work in partnership with these bodies to develop and promote our cultural resources.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Cover image: Miami Night, by Erin MacKeen, Toronto, ON
Cover design: Cathy MacLean Design, Pleasant Bay, NS
Layout: Mike Hunter, Port Hawkesbury and Sydney, NS
First printed in Canada.
Second printing 2014

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Campbell, Robert A. (Robert Arthur), 1952-, author
Governance and social leadership / Robert A. Campbell.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-897009-70-3 (pbk).-- ISBN 978-1-927492-64-2
(pdf).--ISBN 978-1-927492-65-9 (epub).--ISBN 978-1-927942-66-6
(mobi)

1. Leadership. 2. Leadership--Social aspects. I. Title.
HM1261.C34 2014 303.3'4 C2014-900508-3
C2014-900509-1

Cape Breton University Press
PO Box 5300, 1250 Grand Lake Road
Sydney, NS B1P 6L2 CA
www.cbupress.ca

Preface

The ideas expressed here reflect my personal struggles over the past few decades to understand governance and leadership. My experience working in industry and the nonprofit sectors combined with my academic background in sociology, both as a student and as a faculty member, have provided me with a great deal of exposure to a variety of manifestations and understandings of these phenomena. The net result of this exposure, however, has been an increasing frustration over how little we actually know about these critical areas of public concern and how often both are abused to facilitate the pursuit of personal interest.

The actual work of trying to articulate my position on these matters emerged out of my experience developing and teaching an advanced course on leadership for students in the MBA program in community economic development, for the Shannon School of Business at Cape Breton University, in Sydney, Nova Scotia. My use of the word advanced is meant to capture two things. First, students taking the course have already completed the core business courses, including courses in organizational behaviour, leadership and community economic development. Second, the course provides the opportunity to expose students to a theoretically more challenging exploration of issues related to governance and leadership—one that raises as many questions as answers, but also develops their skills in analysis and synthesis.

That being said, this is not a textbook. It does not attempt to provide a systematic and comprehensive coverage of leadership or governance in an objective and sterile manner, with specific learning goals, sidebars, illustrations, glossaries, questions for reflection and cases for review and application. Nor is it an academic monograph, grounded in a specific theoretical framework, following a particular methodology in an attempt to prove, or at least support, some hypothesis, through the collection and analysis of data. Similarly, it is not a trade book aimed at the presumed intel-

ligent and interested general reader, written in a familiar, if not journalistic, style, providing enthusiastic, if not particularly deep, insight into some phenomenon of interest, anchored in current events, while keeping notes and references to a minimum. *Rather it has a bit of all three.* Because I am an academic, and because I am concerned that all readers understand the sources of my ideas and are provided with ample direction to pursue their own interests in a more systematic and informed manner, it is somewhat pedantic in its method of presentation. At the same time, I hope that I have managed to write it in a manner that will appeal, and be of some use, to students, academics, practitioners and the general reader. More than anything else, however, it is a guidebook based on my own journey toward understanding the relationship between leadership and governance and developing the notion of social leadership.

Governance and leadership are distinct but inseparable aspects of organizational life. Regrettably, the concept of leadership has been overused to the extent of rendering it almost meaningless. Governance, most often equated with government, is well on its way to suffering the same fate. Despite our misunderstanding of these concepts, governance structures provide the environment in which leadership can emerge. The idea of social leadership captures two critical elements beyond this. First, it draws attention to the fact that the process of carrying out leadership must be one that is social. In other words, it must involve constructive interaction among those involved. Second, the product of the exercise of leadership must be social. It must contribute to social wellbeing in a substantial and sustainable way.

I want to thank the many students who have taken leadership courses from me over the last couple of decades, both in university classrooms and in other venues, for allowing me to subject them to various experiments in pedagogy, course content and ways of thinking. Thanks also to Brittany Erickson, Catherine Leviten-Reid, Jacke Scott and Janice Tulk for their helpful comments and suggestions throughout the writing process.

Robert Campbell, Sydney, Nova Scotia, May 2014

Governance and Social Leadership

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1. Setting the Stage

Briefly stated, there are three reasons for you to read this book. First, rather than providing another theory of leadership, I am offering a new model of how to understand leadership—one that hinges on a particular interpretation of the word social. Second, I dare to explore not just one of the most overused and least understood concepts in the organizational studies vocabulary (leadership), I also tackle the increasingly used but equally misunderstood concept of governance. Third, I am making a deliberate effort to be troublesome.

One of the ways that I mean to be troublesome is through the introduction of disparate ideas from a variety of academic disciplines (arts, humanities, natural and social sciences) and realms of experience (family, school, work, play and community), many of which are not frequently used in discussions of leadership. Some of these ideas should immediately seem germane to the subject matter at hand, while others may appear to be trivial or superfluous. I learned long ago not to underestimate the power of anecdote as an aid to understanding (see Solway 1991); I prefer to interpret “trivial” in the outdated scholastic sense of foundational, rather than in the newer unfortunate sense of superfluous, or irrelevant.

My approach to studying ideas is consistent with what Johns Hopkins University historian Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873-1962) referred to as the history of ideas (1960). This field is exemplified

by interdisciplinary research projects for which the proper unit of analysis is the idea and the appropriate task for the researcher is to discover the origins, modes of expression, means of preservation and manifold changes that these ideas undergo through time. Similarly, my approach is influenced by what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) called the adventure of ideas (1967). Not only was Whitehead interested in examining those ideas that came to form the intellectual foundation of Western civilization, he also used this expression to imply an attitude of adventure and play—one in which the researcher is always open to, and indeed should purposefully attempt to find, novel ways of thinking about things.

My approach can also be viewed as being genealogical, in two senses of that word. The first sense, which is similar to the way it is used in regard to the increasingly popular pastime of tracing one's family tree, can be captured by the declaration that, "if I have seen further, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." This well-rehearsed saying, used primarily by those engaged in what are commonly referred to as the hard sciences, is of course a metaphor for making progress by building on the work of those who came before you. In the form it is stated here it is attributed to the mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton (1642-1727), but it appears in the first instance to have been used by the 12th-century philosopher Bernard of Chartres (d. 1130), in reference to the lasting legacy of ancient Greek thinkers. It is not the implied modesty contained in this statement, even when false, that concerns me, but rather the path of indebtedness that it acknowledges. If you are going to rely on what others have done before you, and you really have no choice but to do so, then you should at least have a rudimentary awareness of who those others were, and how they came to define and dominate a particular discourse.

The second sense of "genealogical" might appear to contradict the first. In an effort to trace the origins of his own thought processes, French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) wrote a brilliant essay entitled, "Nietzsche, genealogy, history." In this

essay, which became the first chapter of his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), he suggests that genealogy is not the search for the origins of an idea, or the attempt to construct a distinct path of linear development. Rather, it is the task of discovering the pluralistic and often contradictory threads that come together to contribute to our understanding of ideas, as a means of exposing the influence that power has had on the construction of truth. Foucault was interested in uncovering irregularities and inconsistencies; in a way, his genealogies say more about those who construct an idea, and their reasons for doing so, than they do about the idea itself. I prefer to see the two senses as complementary.

As an initial example of a concept that normally does not enter into discussions of leadership, in the late 1950s, psychiatrist and pioneer in the field of cybernetics, Ross Ashby (1903-1972), formulated the Law of Requisite Variety. Stated in its bluntest form, this law says that, “only variety can destroy variety” (Ashby 2011: 206). Ashby was concerned with the problem of regulating complex systems, particularly missile guidance systems, but also with applications like the creation of effective broad-spectrum antibiotics. His ideas were influenced by developments in information theory, especially those of the field’s major pioneer, Claude Shannon (1916-2001), who was concerned with the fact that too much information increases the uncertainty of properly understanding a message (1948). However, Ashby’s notion of requisite variety entails both quantitative (how much variety) and qualitative (what kind of variety) components. He recognized that part of understanding and potentially controlling a system required accounting for the heterogeneity among the parts that make up a system, the diverse sets of connections that may exist between these parts, and the types of interactions that might take place between these parts.

Helmut Nechansky (2008) restates Ashby’s law in the negative form: if a system does not possess the requisite variety, it will be unable to cope with the challenges it faces. For our purposes then, this law implies that if our understanding of leadership is not as complex as the leadership situations that we will encounter,

we will not be able to deal with those situations effectively. This observation gives rise to a number of questions, of which the most obvious is likely to be one of how we produce leaders with requisite variety. One potential response is to look at the possibility of distributing understanding among a number of individuals, thereby establishing a more responsive system by tapping into collective intelligence. Of course, the problem then becomes one of how to organize in such a way as to facilitate collective action. Attempting to resolve this latter issue is central to the development of the concept of social leadership and, I would suggest, the effective management of complex human systems is, of necessity, predicated on the constructive entanglement of modes of leadership and modes of governance.

Threshold Concepts

The second way I try to be troublesome is through the presentation of ideas, some of which I hope will prove to be threshold concepts for many readers. In a series of articles beginning in 2003, Jan Meyer and Ray Land develop the notion of threshold concepts in higher education. These are concepts that are specific to the knowledge base and nomenclature of a particular discipline or realm of human activity, which possess the following four characteristics: they are transformative, integrative, irreversible—and troublesome. When an idea has the effect of bringing about a change in perception or practice, then it is transformative. If that idea leads to an awareness of patterns and connections within a body of knowledge, then it is integrative. To categorize an idea as irreversible means that it is something that you will not likely be able to forget or unlearn. Finally, a troublesome notion is one that may be counter-intuitive; more importantly, it is definitely going to be unsettling, or disorienting, leading to the development of a reconstitutive change in understanding or practice.

Many years ago, I was having a discussion with a co-worker about the value of acquiring a basic understanding of physics. He told me that when he was taking physics in high school, his

instructor had said that the only reason he appeared to be standing still was because the floor was pushing up on him with the same amount of force that he was pushing down on the floor. My co-worker was convinced that this counter-intuitive notion was a convenient fiction, created by and for physicists, but not actually a characteristic of the physical world. While Newton's Third Law of Motion, the particular bit of physics in question here, may appear trivial, or something you could happily live the rest of your life without knowing, I provide this example, in part to stress the final characteristic of threshold concepts—the fact that they are troublesome. Troublesome concepts can be quite threatening, and as with other threats, denial or avoidance are common and convenient defense mechanisms.

Certainly, as anyone who has learned something new can attest, acquiring knowledge, especially when it involves questioning what we already know, requires a period of discomfort, disorientation and, often, denial. Pedagogically, there is an onus on the teacher/mentor/leader to provide an environment in which this liminality (sense of disorientation, in-between-ness) can be resolved. Otherwise, the comfort of ignorance may trump the liberating effect of knowledge. Of course, this same process has the effect of separating out the next generation of physicists from those destined to pursue other interests. Lack of ability or desire can unhinge the best of intentions.

Researchers have identified a number of threshold concepts in business-related fields, including the ideas of depreciation in accounting (Lucas and Mladenovic 2006) and opportunity cost in economics (Meyer and Land 2003). With respect to threshold concepts in leadership, on the basis of participant observation in a leadership class, Jeffrey Yip and Joseph Raelin (2011) found that two ideas stood out: situational leadership and shared leadership. Learning the former concept, initially developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1967), had the effect of leading to an appreciation of the contextual aspects of leadership. Understanding the latter concept, which reflects a broad set of approaches rather than a specific theory (see Raelin 2003), caused a shift from the

more independent, egocentric conception of leadership prevalent among the students to one that encompasses interdependence and broader participation. As we proceed, recognizing the importance of context and interdependence is critical to understanding the concept of social leadership. At the same time, I cannot identify what, if anything, I have to say in these pages will constitute a threshold concept for any particular reader. All I can do is provoke. Hopefully the effort will not be interpreted as provocation for its own sake.

Building on this latter point, being troublesome can also be viewed as a form of what ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011) referred to as a breaching experiment (1967). Ethnomethodology is a mode of sociological inquiry that examines the everyday methods that people use to create social order. We all develop patterns of behaviour—as individuals and in concert with others—which we use to establish and maintain a sense of normalcy in our lives. These patterns become second nature to the extent that we are often no longer aware of what it is that we do. A breaching experiment is one in which routine activities are purposefully disrupted in order to observe and identify those elements that constitute the normative pattern.

Some years ago I was asked to direct a seminar for a group of teachers who were working toward an advanced education certificate while on sabbatical from their classrooms. I thought long and hard about how to go about this exercise in order to derive maximum benefit from the short time that we had together, mindful of the fact that these individuals had been teaching for twenty-five years. I chose David Solway's book, *Lying about the Wolf* (1997), as the focus for our discussions, and for the first meeting I asked them to read just the first two pages. As an opening remark, I announced that I was going to demonstrate to them that they did not know how to read, or at least, even if they had once known how, that over the years they had forgotten how. Amidst the anticipated skepticism and thinly veiled hostility generated by this insult, I spent the next two hours going through those two pages word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, sentence-by-sentence and

paragraph-by-paragraph, until they had convinced themselves that perhaps their reading skills could use a bit of work.

There are two points to make here. First, it is possible, and I would suggest relatively common in human experience, that the troublesome aspect of a concept precedes the opportunity for it to be transformative, integrative or irreversible. In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a satirical novel by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), a Balnibarbian architect devises a scheme for building houses from the roof down (see Solway 1997: 41-67). It seems to me that all too often this is exactly how governance and leadership—in fact, all forms of management—are practiced and experienced. Thus, to my second point, the pedagogical and leadership opportunity in many instances may be one of going back to help people build the house upon which that roof is perched.

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Turning now to the second reason for you to read this book, as reflected in the book's title, I am writing not only about leadership, but also about governance. This approach is not original to me either. Rather, it is consistent with an emerging, but as yet highly underdeveloped, trend in organizational management studies (see Erakovic and Jackson 2009). To some extent this trend is growing in response to the recognition of the importance of context in understanding and practicing leadership and governance. At the same time it can be seen as a response to the growing public disillusionment and anxiety in the presence of so many failures of our present leadership and governance systems. Among other things, these failures highlight the inadequacy of our current theories to help us understand what actually takes place in these arenas and to suggest mechanisms for correction. One of the first points of clarification necessary for the constructive integration of these two concepts is that governance is not equivalent to government. These ideas are explored in greater depth in the coming chapters.

The primary reason for you to read this book, though, is because I am presenting a new model of how to think about leadership. While the exact details of this model are not spelled

out until the final chapter, all of the pieces necessary for final assembly will be introduced throughout. The key distinction to be made at this point is that when I use the words leader and leadership, I will be using them in a very general sense that encompasses the vast array of meanings they have acquired among academics, leadership gurus, media pundits and the general public. As an extension of this use, I will sometimes be implying something a bit more judgmental, along the lines of what Maltese physician, and Da Vinci Professor of Thinking at the University of Advancing Technology, Edward de Bono (b. 1933) called porridge words—words that are very useful but meaningless (1971). When I use the term social leadership, I am referring directly to my own model.

Some might suggest that there is a level of redundancy in using the expression social leadership, because all leadership is social. They may argue that there can be no such thing as non-social leadership, and perhaps they are right. However, I think it is safe to suggest that there are forms of asocial leadership—leadership that ignores or disregards the human component—and we know very well that there are forms of anti-social leadership aimed at undermining or negating the human element. Consequently, at a minimum, the expression social leadership is useful with respect to making these sorts of distinctions. As you might expect, however, I am using the word social in a particular way, and thus its use to modify the word leadership takes on particular significance in what follows.

As a cautionary note before moving on, let me reiterate that my model is not a new *theory* of leadership, but rather a *model* for understanding leadership—a heuristic tool to be used to identify assumptions about leadership. But, beyond that, and more prescriptively, it is also a model of what leadership theories and practice should be.

The Academic Study of Leadership

Anticipating another source of apprehension, I acknowledge that there are those who would likely contend that the academic study

of leadership is too far removed from the actual practice of leadership. While this sort of criticism could be levelled at any and every academic discipline, it takes on special significance with respect to leadership. In part, this is because we continue to witness so much bad leadership on the part of politicians, corporate executives and religious leaders—to name a few. As a consequence, we are particularly skeptical about ivory-tower proclamations and the ramblings of gurus and pundits, all the while being desperate for insight.

Of course, you do not need to be familiar with the details of any particular theory of leadership in order to be an effective leader. Like the *bourgeois gentilhomme*, title character in the play (1670) by French playwright Molière (1622-1673), who was astonished to learn that he had been speaking prose his whole life without knowing it, you may be performing as an exemplary transformational leader, without knowing there was a name for it. However, as you watch others attempt to lead, or as you try to improve your own leadership skills, knowing something about the way in which leadership theories are constructed and categorized can help you not only to identify leadership when it takes place, but also provide you with a means to analyze and evaluate its effectiveness.

On the assumption that leadership is something that can be taught, standard course texts on the subject (see Daft 2011; Yukl 2013) attempt to treat leadership in a systematic manner that reflects the best evidence available from research projects and case studies, all the while cautioning against the acceptance of ideas that have yet to be subjected to adequate empirical justification. Standalone textbooks on leadership are a relatively recent phenomenon, having evolved out of the subject matter usually covered in courses in organizational behaviour, or in what simply used to be called management. If you examine management textbooks from a few decades ago (see Donnelly et al. 1971; Hitt et al. 1986), not only will you find coverage of a similar suite of topics, you will also find that our assessment of the state of our knowledge on the subject is far from what we would like