

**From Laurels to Learners:
Leadership with Virtue**

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Abstract

Purpose –To present a new approach to leadership development founded on the principle of the Leader-as-Learner: a reflective human who pursues the 4C- virtues of Courage, Commitment, Confidence and Curiosity, rather than the laurels of traditional approaches of heroic leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Exploring Art-based Methods (ABM) and fostering a new approach to leadership development: Leaders-as-Learners.

Findings – Studies and theoretical findings from the literature are discussed.

Research limitations/implications – Extending life stories and modes of learning by projecting possible selves as leaders, to learn the daily practice of leadership.

Practical implications – Leadership involves not only the art of judgment but refines it through a learning orientation to confront VUCA conditions.

Social implications – Leadership is not limited to organizations and in relation to work practices. It is a central aspect in all social affairs and integral to building societies which serve, through leaders, the common good.

Originality/value – An approach to leadership development that supports human flourishing and locates leadership among ordinary people who do extra-ordinary things.

Keywords – Leadership, Learning, Courage, Commitment, Confidence, Curiosity

Paper type - Conceptual paper

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“Even the longest journey must begin where you stand.”

(Lao-Tzu, 604 BC - 531 BC)

Introduction

Leadership education and development have traditionally relied on a heroic perspective (Collison and Tourish, 2015), centred on a mythologized image of the leader. In this approach, becoming a leader is the metaphorical equivalent of being crowned with laurels, celebrated for the qualities and achievements of a winner, worthy of influencing others and exercising power over them. This approach is characterized by the prescriptive models prevalent in the socialization of managerial elites, where leadership is treated as exclusionary and hierarchical, and leaders belong on a “league of their own: a mythical world of possibility that everyone can envision, very few can be a part of, and only a handful can deliver” (Antonacopoulou, 2008, p. 30).

This “laurels” model of leadership education and development provides students with a language to talk eloquently about leadership, but is limited in its ability to develop leadership *per se*. It results too often in producing “highly skilled barbarians” (Bisoux, 2002, p. 28), full of hubris but unequipped to confront the “giga challenges to ethical leadership” (Jones and Millar, 2010).

The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) of today’s turbulent environment (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) do not allow leaders to rest on their laurels. Instead, they call for an alternative approach to leadership, characterized by perpetual learning. In this

“leadership-as-learning” model, leaders are keenly aware of both the limitations and potential of human nature, in themselves and others. This humanization of leadership (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015) implies that leading, regardless of one’s stage in life or career, requires a willingness to continuously learn the kind of leadership that emerges step by step, from one’s quotidian context and embedded in their everyday actions and the associated judgments that qualify them for the title of ‘leader’. This approach to leadership is inclusive and egalitarian; available to everyone, regardless of position.

‘Leaders-as-Learners’ are defined by the questions they ask of themselves and others, not the answers they provide. Instead of being surprised or frustrated when confronted with the challenges of a VUCA world, they learn that these challenges are to be expected, and become progressively able to extract learning from them as they navigate the unknown with the 4C-virtues of *Courage, Commitment, Confidence, and Curiosity*. Together, these *4-C virtues* can help leaders respond to Bond et al.’s (2010) account of the 4C-challenges (Change, Complexity, Context, Connectedness) confronting leaders. This paper contributes to the agenda of humanising leadership by examining the Leader-as-Learner approach to individual and programmatic leadership development and exploring how it can be supported by pedagogies such as arts-based methods (ABM).

Leader-as Learner: An Approach to Leadership Learning

The “laurels” approach to leadership education and development focuses on the explicit dimensions of leadership, i.e., external, observable tasks and leader behaviours. In contrast, the

“Leader-as-Learner” approach considers its tacit dimensions as well, such as identity, temperament and character (Sosik, 2015).

Leadership as a window to inner learning

Leadership fundamentally entails a search to discover one’s true self, a leader’s true voice in service of a higher purpose. This requires an awareness of self-in-context that is based on learning with beginner’s eyes, unburdened by mindless habits. In this perspective, leaders engage not only in their own learning, but in fostering the learning and growth of others.

This kind of inner learning allows us to develop as leaders who are profoundly human and who can see the humanity of others. Listening to our inner voice enables us to become individuals in the full sense of the word: both in terms of nurturing what individuates us from others - in the sense of our unique characteristics- but also in terms of being “un-divided” – recognizing that each of us is “an inseparable part of the social whole” (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2010, p. 100).

Leadership as a relational process

In this re-conceptualization of individuality as a pathway to collectivity and connectivity, inner learning supports human flourishing in relationality, which implies that we treat leadership as a relational process. Once we become truly aware of our common humanity, the “other” is no longer an abstraction. Instead of the rational, intentional decision-maker of the “laurels” approach, the Leader-as-Learner is a whole person, complete with emotions (Caruso et al., 2014) and the emotional intelligence to relate to others as full human beings as well (Goleman, 1997). Rather than seeing emotions as impediments to deliberation and choice, they use their emotions to gain insight into others, and thus are able to liberate energy in themselves and others.

The Leader-as-Learner approach involves a sense of interconnectedness where leaders are no longer seen as purely self-reliant heroes, who rely on being “extraordinary” enough to compensate for the ordinariness of their followers. Instead, Leaders-as-Learners are members of communities of learning, where they step up as needed, but also have the humility and self-awareness to recognize and celebrate the talents of others, acknowledging the distributed nature of leadership that is embedded in the individual and collective capacity to learn in a given context.

Leadership as a labour of love, rooted in phronesis and paideia

In the Leader-as-Learner approach, the inner learning that is necessary for leadership, together with the relational process that allows it to emerge from a community of learning, contribute to characterize leadership as a labour of love. The term “labour” is used here to signify “both ‘labour’ as work, the persistent effort of everyday experience, and ‘labour’ as birth, the generative process of growing one’s identity when one fully joins society” (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2010, p. 77).

Learning leadership can be seen not as a goal in and of itself, but as the natural consequence of doing something one loves. For Leaders-as-Learners, who develop the capacity to become fully engaged (cognitively, spiritually and emotionally) in what they do, everyday experience becomes a central source of learning leadership and becoming a leader. This is a departure from the “laurels” approach to leadership education and development, which relies on two of the three modes of knowledge identified by Aristotle - scientific and technical knowledge. In contrast, the Leadership-as-Learning approach emphasizes Aristotle’s third mode of knowledge: practical knowledge or *phronesis*. Practice is central to *phronesis*: it is through everyday experience, within a given community and context, that Leaders-as-Learners build knowledge from the *phronetic* choices they make, exercising practical judgment as they formulate intentions and choose courses of action. This process is not linear, but recursive: *phronesis* involves reflexive critique – “the

capacity to re-hearse, re-view and re-new ...in the search for higher purpose on the road to becoming” a leader (Antonacopoulou, 2010, p. 9).

When one approaches leadership as a labour of love, the choice to conduct oneself with *phronesis* creates the potential for a generative experience of becoming fully human that is encapsulated in the ancient Greeks concept of *paideia*. *Paideia* combines the idea of “individuation and society”, with inborn individual potential being cultivated through social activity (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2010). Through the practical judgment (*phronesis*) they exercise in the everyday choices they make within their specific community and context, they develop and are developed by others, becoming learning conduits consistent with the notion of *paideia*.

Realizing the Impact of the Leader-as-Learner approach

The relevance of the Leader-as-Learner approach is not restricted to people occupying or seeking traditional “leadership” positions in organizations. It addresses the wider “leadership talent crisis” (Ashford and DeRue, 2012, p.147) by nurturing human agency and potential, through a “mindful engagement” methodology, whereby individuals, regardless of their formal positions develop the “leader within”. When leaders-as-learners engage mindfully and critically with lived experience, they become immersed in a virtuous cycle of practising, where learning and action are interconnected, and crisis becomes an opportunity for learning (Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer, 2014). This enables them to approach each situation – whether expected or unexpected – with equanimity, since they are not driven by hubris and competition for laurels, but by the humility and resilience that comes from knowing that their worth as leaders resides in the ability to learn from both success and failure, and is not dependent on either. This mode of learning is in line with critical leadership pedagogy, as it calls into question the conventional power structures and

possible misalignments between the goals of leaders and followers (Collinson and Tourish, 2015). It instigates new learning structures to provide the opportunity for leadership to emerge, be discovered and jointly constructed (or disputed).

The traditional approach of ‘teaching’ leadership is driven by an economic logic aimed at extracting the most ‘value’ from the leader-follower exchange, promoting a romantic ‘heroic leadership’ model (the ‘laurels’ approach). In contrast, the ‘learning’ leadership approach proposes an alternative, ‘value-as-virtue’ logic, aimed at understanding and forging a better social contract among members of a community, where asymmetrical power relationships do not invite abuse and dominance, and where integrative tactics are successfully applied to the negotiation of possibly conflicting interests (Collinson and Tourish, 2015). This approach to learning leadership encourages the development of environments where Leaders-as-Learners can find paths for personal and collective growth, beyond the classic teaching apparatus of prescriptive methodologies.

The literature on organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1996) and learning organization (Senge, 2014) offers significant insights for the Leader-as-Learner approach to leadership development. It invites a greater sensitivity to the assumptions that guide actions as integral to questioning the practice of learning individually and collectively.

The Leader-as-Learner approach also shares conceptual kinship with the literature on authentic leadership, with its emphasis on being true to oneself, inspiring trust and behaving in ways that reflect the values of the leader within (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2017). However, the Leader-as-Learner approach differs, in a subtle but significant way, from traditional approaches to authentic leadership: in the language of Dweck’s ‘fixed’ versus ‘growth’ mindsets (Dweck, 2006; Chugh & Kern, 2016) we could argue

that traditional authentic leadership approaches to leadership development tend to treat the ‘authentic self’ as a fixed, stable core that just needs to manifest through leader behaviors, whereas the Leader-as-Learner approach sees that self from a growth perspective, as fluid, evolving, and capable of learning.

Leader-as-Learners are not seeking to be present themselves as heroes, because they do not see themselves as being perfect either. They commit to the hardest of heroic acts, learning and leading, with the mistakes such a process challenges them to also learn from, in order to lead in ways that make a difference and serve the common good.

Leader-as-Learner and Arts-Based Methods for leadership development

Several authors have emphasized the role that different types of experience can play in leadership development. Bartsch (2012) emphasized the emotional learning that can result from corporate volunteering, where immersive experiences in social institutions contribute to significant leadership development. Gitsham (2012) found that experiential, immersive experiences can be quite effective in the development of leadership mindsets and skills. Muir (2014) pointed out the influence of mentoring on leader identity development. De Rue and Wellman (2009), in their study of the role of experience in developing leaders, found that increasing the challenge of on-the-job experiences yielded diminishing returns for the development of leadership skills, but, at high levels of developmental challenge, this effect can be offset by access to feedback.

Arts-based methods (ABM) have shown great promise in bringing a learning perspective to the education and development of Leaders-as-Learners (Adler, 2015). The ‘Art of Management’ movement in leadership development cultivates ‘value creation capacity’ by integrating technical, emotive and sensuous knowledge through the arts (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). ABM are innovative

learning modes, capable of supporting individual and collective transformation, as evidenced by pioneering in-house leadership development programs like Unilever UK's 1999-2008 'Catalyst' project (Darsø, 2004). ABM have been particularly emphasized in some Business Schools (e.g. CBS, Rodman, IEDC), which have incorporated the arts and artistic processes into management education (Barry and Meisiek, 2014).

ABM can support learning leadership in numerous ways, through approaches that help uncover, interpret and address power imbalances, and that allow leaders to learn how to be, and interact, in the moment (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2003; Edwards et al., 2015). ABM open a space for participants to express and discover leadership, raising awareness that improvisation is an intrinsic aspect of life in a turbulent world (Cunha et al., 2016).

ABM can help cultivate Leaders-as-Learners through techniques that allow participants to revise their stories by letting go of habitual thoughts and patterns of behaviour, thus instigating learning through *safety in vulnerability* (Antonacopoulou, 2014). Whether through poetry, painting, sculpture or music, ABM help cultivate learners' creative potential: participants relinquish modes of safety in traditional routines of self-presentation and instead expose their vulnerability by stepping out of their comfort zone and confronting the experience of becoming a beginner, re-examining their work experiences from the generative perspective of acknowledging beauty in 'ugliness' and in tensions that surround everyday reality (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2016). Whether in "improv" theatre or image theatre - inspired by Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" (1979) - improvisational techniques invite active listening; being open to various interpretations, exploring gut instincts and intuition; tolerating mistakes and supporting others by not judging one's own and other's ideas but by actively participating in the act, blurring the usual distinctions between actors (leaders) and spectators (followers). ABM nurture perceptual

refinement by fostering greater engagement with the senses (Springborg, 2012): this enables ‘seeing more and seeing differently’ (Barry and Meisiek, 2010), allowing leaders to work with the chaotic, dynamic and subjective environments of contemporary organizations through greater ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ (Sutherland, 2013).

The appreciation of ABM elements such as surprise, vulnerability, improvisation and (re)invention can also be found in the use of personal stories of Leaders-as-Learners. Antonacopoulou and Bento (2010, 2016) highlight the importance of examining stories of how ‘extra-ordinary’ leadership emerges from the otherwise ordinary experiences of ‘regular’ people. Personal stories from learners in MBA and executive education programs can personalize and contextualize their leadership learning by sharing insights of their own leadership journey, their identities and experiences. This engaged approach can “humanize leadership” by designing leadership interventions around three questions: “what does it mean to lead? Why, toward what, and on whose behalf does one lead? How does one get to lead?” (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, *ibid.*). Learners are not provided with easy answers, but encouraged to examine their experiences by using these questions as sense-making tools. They are invited to engage in *sensuous learning*, where they experience heightened *attentiveness*, *alertness*, *awareness* and *appreciation* of the conditions that invite them to rise to the challenge of leadership and become leaders because they activate their *voice of conscience* (Antonacopoulou, 2016; 2017). Sensuous learning extends previous calls for virtuous leadership that focus on the intellectual and emotional aspects central to leader character (Havard, 2007; Crossan et al., 2017). Fundamentally, sensuous learning central to the learning leadership, which we advance here, is not only about the magnanimity, humility, prudence, self-control and justice among the cardinal virtues that leaders would reflect in their behaviors. What we draw attention to is the way sensuous learning guides *conduct*. Conduct is not

just behavior, it is what adds the ‘extra’ to the ‘extra-ordinary’ leaders who as leaders-as-learners sense their way as they navigate complex situations guided by core values (axies) that their character and virtue reflects, but they live fully in the moment striving for personal excellence, because they rise to the challenge they are presented with. In this respect leader-learners conduct themselves with the ethos of learning to bring virtues to life coming to their senses as they act with *synaesthesia* – conscience (Antonacopoulou, 2012).

Conceptual and empirical support for ABM in leadership development

A variety of Arts-Based Methods have been used in leadership development, including music (Harrison, 2017), dance (Ropo and Sauer, 2008), theatre (Taylor, 2013), painting (Adler, 2015) and so on. The learning mechanisms underlying the use of ABM have been studied by Taylor and Ladkin (2009, p.56), who identified four specific processes through which Arts-Based Interventions (ABI) contribute to the development of managers and leaders:

- Transfer of artistic skills (e.g., when leaders learn theatre skills to help develop their capacity for empathy and verbal / non-verbal communication);
- Projective techniques (e.g., when leaders create artistic outputs, such as 3-D representations of organizational strategy, that help “reveal feelings that may not be accessible through more conventional developmental modes”);
- Evocation of ‘essence’ (e.g., when leaders experience works of art, such as paintings, movies, plays or literature, that help them “apprehend the ‘essence’ of a concept, situation, or tacit knowledge in a particular way, revealing depths and connections that more propositional and linear developmental orientations cannot”);

- ‘Making’ (e.g., when leaders experience the healing power of art by creating artefacts – masks, collages, sculpture, paintings, etc. – through processes that foster ‘presence and connection,’ instead of the fragmentation and alienation so often characteristic of corporate lives).

Those four processes underlying ABM involve different combinations of emphasis on art process versus art products, and on the universal versus the particular nature of art. A typology thus emerges, where two types of ABM can be seen as focusing on the art process (with “skills transfer” focusing on the universal, and “making” on the particular); and the other two types of ABM focusing on art products (“illustration of essence” focusing on the universal, and “projective techniques” on the particular). Particular examples of ABM may combine more than one process: for example, the mask-making leadership development exercise at the Banff Centre combines “making” and “projective technique” processes, and the “Concert of Ideas” by Creative Leaps combines skills transfer, illustration of essence, and projective technique.

In their comprehensive exploration of the multiple ways of using ABM, and how they fit in the different combinations of these four processes, Taylor and Ladkin (2009) remind us of the distinctive epistemology inherent in arts-based interventions. Traditional approaches to leadership development are typically based on a purely cognitive, rational and ‘propositional’ way of knowing ‘about’ something (Heron & Reason, 2001). In contrast, ABM approaches to developing leaders involve non-traditional, ‘presentational’ ways of knowing that “provide relatively direct access to our felt experience and draw upon our emotional connection to our self, others, and our experience” (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p. 56). ABM liberate aesthetic, intellectual and emotional engagement and promote a mode of learning that emphasizes *practising* (Romanowka et al., 2013; Antonacopoulou 2010).

The emphasis on practising is a critical condition for the kind of learning that cultivates virtues and not only the development of skills and knowledge. It creates the foundation for feeling safe being vulnerable that underpins the experience of learning (Antonacopoulou, 2014) and propels the *Courage* to relinquish control, even when seeking it; the *Commitment* to learn, even when we barely know how; the *Confidence* to let go of laurels, even when everyone else seems to be seeking them; and the *Curiosity* to keep searching, even if it means becoming a perpetual and vulnerable beginner.

Practising to become a leader is about cultivating virtues such as the 4Cs in the Leader-as-Learner approach proposed here, a point that already finds support in recent studies that demonstrate empirically the impact of ABM. Garavan et al. (2015) conducted a field experiment with leaders in a large multinational corporation to evaluate the impact of an arts-based intervention. Their pre-post comparisons of 164 leaders revealed that those in the arts-based intervention showed significant improvement in three areas of leader mindset: emotional intelligence, leader identity, openness to experience and feedback orientation. We recognize these aspects of leader mindset as integral to cultivating virtues like, courage, commitment, confidence and curiosity, because they ‘preserve and disturb the canon’ as Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst (2017) show in their analysis of aesthetic leadership in theatre and in curatorial practice, where the reflexive awareness enables a sensuous alertness and an empathetic attitude to foster the levels of trust so critical when navigating the unknown.

Similarly, Romanowska and colleagues (2014) investigated empirically the effects of Arts-Based Interventions (ABI - combining multiple ABM such as experimental theatre, literary text, music, discussion and writing) on leadership development. Compared to conventional leadership development programs, ABI resulted in significant improvement in performance and psychosocial

stress for both the leaders and their subordinates, in various measures of mental health, covert coping and performance-based self-esteem. The beneficial impacts of the ABI manifested not only in terms of measures based on standardized questionnaires, but also in biological parameters such as the serum concentration of the regenerative/anabolic hormone dehydroepiandrosterone-sulfate (Romanowska et al., 2011). The empirical comparison of the two leadership programs (conventional versus ABI) further revealed that the ABI led to significant improvement in two aspects of leader personality (Sense of Coherence and Agreeableness) and in two aspects of leadership behaviors evaluated by subordinates – Laissez-faire and Capacity to Cope with Stress (Romanowska et al., 2013). Moreover, the comparison of leaders' self-ratings and subordinates' ratings of their leaders' frequency of expressed behaviors revealed a striking advantage for the arts intervention vis-à-vis the conventional leadership development program. ABM resulted in less laissez-faire leadership, improved capacity to cope with stress, and more self-awareness and humility (Romanowska et al., 2014).

Concluding thoughts

The “laurels” approach to leadership development celebrates and perpetuates the romantic view of the leader as hero: one who is above others in competence, knowledge, and vision. In the VUCA world of the 21st century, however, the pursuit of this one-size-fits-all model of leadership eventually yields to the realization that one-size-fits-none. The impossibility – and, indeed, the undesirability – of churning out “hero leaders” brought the “leadership talent crisis” (Ashford and DeRue, 2012, p. 146). Bond et al. (2010, pp. 23-24) highlight the need for “a new kind of leadership – one that is able to face the economic turbulence affecting us all as well as the challenges of mega-trends such as resource scarcity and globalisation”. Based on research by Ashridge scholars, their relational leadership framework proposes that this new kind of leader

needs to be able to deal with four interconnected challenges: *Change* (“understanding and working effectively with the dynamics of change”); *Complexity* (“having the skills to survive and thrive in situations of low certainty and low agreement”); *Context* (“understanding key issues and being able to think strategically about how to respond”); and *Connectedness* (“the ability to understand actors in the wider political landscape and to engage and build effective relationships with new kinds of internal and external partners”).

This paper has argued that the Leader-as-Learner approach to leadership development is grounded on the *virtues* that underpin becoming a leader and growing leadership capacity. The Leader-as-Learner approach fosters a mode of learning leadership that cultivates virtues - *Courage*, *Commitment*, *Curiosity* and *Confidence* - as four essential driving forces to deal with the 4C-challenges confronting today’s leaders – Change, Complexity, Context and Connectedness (Bond et al., *ibid*). In proposing the cultivation of 4C virtues to deal with 4C challenges, the Leader-as-Learner approach is comfortable with vulnerability, and takes the prospect of not-knowing (so abhorred in the “laurels” approach) as just a first step in the process of learning and discovering what is possible.

As Lao-Tzu reminds us in the opening quote, “even the longest journey must begin where you stand”. For the Leader-as-Learner, it does not matter if the starting place for this longest journey is one of not-knowing. If that is where one stands, that is where one starts. Then, step by step, one learns along the way, with and from others. It is in the willingness to take the next step, even though we do not know where it will take, that we find the challenge of our common humanity. And the 4-C virtues -- *Courage*, *Commitment*, *Confidence*, *Curiosity* -- help us to keep learning through new and innovative modes, such as ABM, and thus to grow to the full human

potential that is offered by the invitation of becoming a leader. May the leadership journey be long and full of (learning) surprises.

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