

How should we talk about leadership?

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When the Archbishop of Canterbury was on Desert Island Discs just before Christmas, the luxury he wanted to take with him was the complete boxed set of *The West Wing*. For those of you who have recently arrived from Mars, or are under twenty years old, this is a beautifully made TV series about a sincere, committed and clever President of the United States working hard to offer excellent leadership to his country and the world, while surrounded by a brilliant group of staff who are flawed enough to be entertaining. Their hearts are in the right places, but their minds and their bodies are often not. Their tendency to mess things up does not prevent them from coming back to try again to get things right. In all of this they do their best to carry their President's vision through loyally.

The Archbishop is not alone in his admiration for *The West Wing*; apparently it was the favourite late night viewing for Tony Blair and his staff in Downing Street, and it is a common choice for leaders from many fields when talking about their influences. It is sometimes shown on leadership courses to spark discussion about good leadership. What could be a better model of leadership than the urbane, witty, charismatic and fundamentally decent polymath that is President Bartlett?

While *The West Wing* is great television, the very idea of an all-round 'good' leader, such as President Bartlett, is misleading. The notion that someone's characteristics can make them a great leader has no theoretical support, in addition to which it leads quickly to idolatry. It is NOT how we should talk about leadership. Leadership is not about being Superman. No one is good at as many different things as President Bartlett, and if the people you lead say that you are, they are lying to you.

The difficulty we have in talking about leadership is that the concept is too popular. If in doubt about why things are going wrong, call it a leadership problem. Leadership is important, but no one is sure what it actually is or how it could be made better. So, next time we are travelling, we go to the airport bookstall and buy a book about leadership. It is clear from the cover that the author is an accomplished leader who has at last found the secret ingredient that will make all our leadership come good. So we buy it, and read the first three or four pages, by which time it is sounding a little bit difficult and a little less convincing. We then put it on our shelf, and a few weeks later we buy another book which suffers exactly the same fate. Leadership books, like diet books, keep selling because one day we expect to find the key to leadership and all will be well. It is frighteningly easy to become a leadership expert. You come up with a new phrase for an old idea, and then write the book with lots of highly spun examples which tells everyone that this is, at last, what they have been waiting for.

Before we can talk about leadership we have two confusions to clear up.

The first confusion is between a noun and a verb, a role and an activity. We sometimes refer to senior people in organizations as 'the leadership team', and it is sometimes assumed that leadership is done by people at the top. Actually the route

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to the top in many organizations, private as well as public, is never to be caught doing anything wrong, and this is only possible by avoiding taking the risks of leadership. People who wear the leadership t-shirt are not necessarily engaged in the activity of leading.

The other confusion is between stories and how we tell them.. By leading, we mean doing something to take the story forward. This could be the story of our organization, our church, our group or even ourselves. It does not matter how much people strut around trying to tell us that they are important, if they are not taking the story forward, they are not leading. If we want to think about leadership working, we need to call to mind times when we have seen people taking the story forward to good effect. Times when things were being made better, when something was being brought about which would not have happened without leadership.

Human beings tell stories in a particular way. Whether we are talking about someone turning around the fortunes of a school, a company in recovery, or the response to the Ebola epidemic, we tend to talk about the activities of a few heroic figures. We tell stories, with a hero, a few villains and quite possibly a fool. In my work I have had the opportunity to talk to a number of those people about whom heroic leadership stories are told. Most of them share a quality of humility, and they want to tell you about the other people who were involved, who were essential to what happened, but who you never read about in the papers. These are the people who did the bits they were bad at, or who were needed because the leadership task was simply too big for one person to carry on their own. The more we look at the activity of leading in close up, the less individual it looks. Most activities of any significance are put together by a number of different people exercising different skills. For example, here we are at Choral Evensong, a service put together with a number of different skills, exercised by people with different qualities. Is the service led by the clergy, the musicians, the readers or the person giving the talk? Or even those, long dead, who put together the liturgy or the building? On a good day, the answer is that parts of it are led by different people working together to bring about something special, each feeling released to step forward to lead at some points and, equally importantly, stepping back to enable others to lead at other points.

This is how leadership works at its best. Many people are involved in it, stepping up to lead at some points and stepping back to enable others to lead at other points. Sometimes this is because of different technical skills, as in Choral Evensong, sometimes it is because different people have different kinds of leadership to contribute, and sometimes because the size of the leadership task requires the involvement of more people. One authority has suggested that there are four main arts of leadership. First, there is a philosophical art, by which he means, telling the story of the organization and giving it an identity. When I was recruiting professorial staff to Cass Business School, what story did I tell them about where the School had come from and where it was going, in order to persuade them to come and work with us? What was the identity of the School as distinct from, say, Warwick or London Business School? Similarly, what kind of Church is St. Mary's, what is its story and

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where is that story going next, and what is its identity that differentiates it from other churches around here?

Second, there is a fine art. This is where visionary leadership comes in. Having decided on your identity, can you paint a picture of a future that you can work towards? In terms of leadership as a story, this is about painting a picture of a future scene in the story, where you might like to see your organization, group, or self at some future point. What might the churches in Warwick try to achieve over the next two years?

Third, there is a martial art. Does everything work? Are the right meetings being held, being chaired well and being minuted properly? Do decisions get acted upon, and are those actions properly resourced? Is the photocopier working? If not, it does not matter how well the philosophical and fine arts of leadership are being achieved, nothing much will happen, and frustration will be unbounded. We must all, in our time, have seen churches and other organizations that were being wrecked for the lack of a bit of decent martial arts leadership. Is the story being destroyed because it is mired in chaos?

Then there is the charismatic art of leadership, the art of getting people excited and ready to act, the art of engaging the emotions and building enthusiasm. This is what people tend to think of first when they talk about leadership. This is about having a great, engaging storyteller. The best leader I have worked for was weak on charisma. The good news was that he knew this, and let other people strut around being charismatic while he focused on building the organization's identity, its story about itself.

None of these arts can achieve leadership on their own. Think about situations where you have seen leadership working well. Did it not result from all of these arts being combined? It is very unlikely that any one person will be good at all these things. They are much more likely to be achieved by several people working together, bringing their own offering of the leadership art at which they are best.

If we had two readings in tonight's service, the other one I would have asked for would have been 1 Corinthians, 12, 14-26. We only had one, so I will read this one anyhow!

'Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet

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one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.'

This is exactly how effective leadership anywhere, and it gives us much of the answer to how we should talk about Christian leadership. We can only carry forward the story of our organizations, churches etc. by having several people with different gifts work together to carry the stories forward.

Finally, we should not talk about leadership without looking at its uglier side. It has the power to go horribly wrong. Most obviously, this happens with leaders who use their charismatic power to tell a story that fills people with hatred and violence. Uncontroversial examples would be Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Ceausescu, Chairman Mao. We could all come up with examples closer to home, but that might just get us into arguments about which of our national leaders was most toxic.

Bad leadership can be leader driven or follower driven. Leaders can become accustomed to others going along with what they want, and can ratchet up their demands, becoming more and more outrageous, as a kind of virtuoso display of what they can get away with, while caring less and less about their followers as human beings with stories of their own. They can stop listening to the people who follow them. Their view of their own expertise can become inflated. You may be a very good doctor or dentist, but you do not have equal authority when you talk about religion or politics. I speak as one who briefly became the professor of snow, an expert on the effect of snow on the work place, a few years back. I had never thought about it before, but there was a heavy snowfall one new year, many roads around London were blocked, I was accessible to studios in West London by car, and I was well practiced in sounding like an expert. By the time of my first television interview on the topic even I believed in my own authority to talk about snow and productivity. Leaders get caught up in their own propaganda.

But equally, followers may be toxically dependent on leaders. We push people forward to take responsibility for developing the story of our organization or even our own stories because it is more comfortable than taking responsibility for ourselves. This is the topic of the reading we heard earlier from 1 Samuel. Samuel was getting old and his sons were not up to the job of being judges and prophets. The elders of Israel were getting frightened; what would happen if there were no one in authority over them? They did not want that responsibility, and they wanted to be like other nations, so they asked for a king. Samuel felt rejected, and from the passage, so did God. Samuel warned them that a king would exploit them, take their children as his

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servants, take their fields and their crops, and rob them blind. But the people still wanted a king. Every time you hear someone calling for 'strong leadership', think of this passage.

One of the most frequent surprises to me in researching leadership has been how many apparently strong, effective leaders feel exploited by their followers. Of course some of them love the power. But in many cases, they talk about the constraints on their action, about the limitations of their information, and then about how many of their followers see them as having limitless power, and demand that they use it. These leaders are aware of the pressure to appear to be more decisive, stronger, more optimistic, more competitive and sometimes more brutal than they would choose. They know that such 'strong' leadership can be disabling and destructive to people working for them, and does not enable them to make as good a contribution to the organization's story as they could.

So, how should we talk about leadership?

1. If we think we are in charge, we are fooling ourselves. This is obviously true for Christians, but complexity theorists would say that it is true for everyone.
2. No one can do it on their own.
3. We can think of it as developing the story for whatever organization or group we are leading.
4. If we know how to do it, then it is not leadership. Leadership is always an improvisation.