

Commanding a new look at leadership

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ABSTRACT: The *application* of leadership goes back centuries and so has its *understanding*, indeed, Drucker has referred to writers on the subject in ancient Greece and Israel, but all that has not enabled people to learn how to become leaders [1]. This article endeavours to examine the difference in leadership at levels in an organisation, how a change of level can be seen to affect ability to lead, how the culture of a particular organisation affected leadership of one within it, and the importance of an alternative to what is commonly seen as leadership. All are shown by examples, one from a work of fiction and one from real life, and all are aspects of leadership, related to organisational culture, which should be included in engineering education, as part of the management subject-stream.

INTRODUCTION

Through the last several decades what is termed leadership has been a feature of management study generally, indeed, it was a topic in this author's MBA programme in the 1970s. In parallel, it has become a feature of engineering studies, evidenced by a regular page on the topic appearing in the monthly periodical of *Engineers Australia*. In two of his five previously published papers on this topic this author has pointed out paradoxes and fallacies in what is preached about control-by-leadership [2][3], and this present article takes those thoughts further by suggesting there is a form or function of control which, in one sense parallels and, in another sense is above leadership.

This other form or function of control suggested above is *commandership* (a term coined for this article). Considering this function gives an impression it has been avoided in much of the literature because there is an immediate impression, it means *there is someone giving orders*; true enough, but somewhere in any organisation, which has been formed to produce results, there must be someone actually ordering what has to be done, that is, *commanding*. (Readers, please note, for convenience, only the male pronoun will be used, as reported by Disraeli, I intend this to embrace the alternative.)

Having an academic-style paper inspired by a work of fiction must be unusual, although something resembling the opposite has occurred to this author, who has had fiction inspired by his teaching. However, the idea of this present article came from a rather long paragraph in Tom Clancy's *Clear and Present Danger* [4], on page 356 of the paperback copy, and the paragraph in that, which inspired this article, is given here:

Captain Ramirez didn't like the idea of accompanying Chavez. It wasn't cowardice, of course, but a question of what his part of the job actually was. His command responsibilities were muddles in some ways. As a captain who had recently commanded a company, he had learned that commanding isn't quite the same thing as leading. A company commander was supposed to stay a short distance back from the front line and manage - the Army doesn't like that word - the combat action, maneuvering his units and keeping an overview of the battle underway so that he could control matters while his platoon leaders handled the actual fighting. Having learned to lead from the front as a lieutenant, he was supposed to apply his lessons at the next highest level, though there would be times when the captain was expected to take the lead. In this case he was commanding only a squad, and though the mission demanded circumspection and command judgement, the size of his unit demanded personal leadership... The contradiction between his command and leadership responsibilities troubled the young officer, but he came down, as he had to, on the side of leading. He could not exercise command, after all, if his men didn't have confidence in his ability to lead. Somehow he knew that if this one went right, he'd never have the same problem again. Maybe that's how it always worked, he told himself [4].

A rather long extract from the novel, with only two sentences, four lines, omitted from the original printing because they referred to the squad's mission. What is quoted above is needed to show the quandary experienced by Captain Ramirez in this situation before progressing with the different, parallel, function.

THE CLASSIC LEADERSHIP FUNCTION

First, a quick coverage of the general topic before dealing with Captain Ramirez's quandary and ask: *What is this thing called leadership?* So much has been written about it, this author has collected over two dozen books on it, and they all give illustrations of leadership - not really of what it is (in fact most of the writers admit they do not really understand it), but more of how it is done or how it has been done by different people, all employing different techniques, in the past. If it were a medical condition, the doctors would say: *Yes, we can see you are infected with this condition, but we do not know what caused it.* In hunting for a definition, a statement avoided by many writers, the search goes back to an academic under whom this author enjoyed studying some forty years ago:

We define effective leadership as the contrived pattern of interpersonal relations surrounding the head of a hierarchy (or a part of one) which produces achievement of the objectives without increasing the behavioural problems to destructive levels [5].

Essentially, what John W. Hunt was saying to his students at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, was that a person acting as a leader gets the job (whatever it is) done by the group being led without upsetting them, and one can add this infers those being led are as pleased with the result as the leader is. He also confirmed that although much has been written about leadership nevertheless one still has only vague ideas about what leadership is, and what a leader should be. To achieve results as Hunt has expressed, one would expect a person leading a group to success would be well-balanced, have a sense of humour and a sense of justice, and be a humanitarian, plus any number of other *good* qualities, but history presents confusion if one looks for examples of leaders with those qualities, for although some have had some of those qualities, as Byrt has remarked, there has been leaders like Hitler, Napoleon, the Wesleys, John Knox, Cromwell, Mary Baker Eddy, Elizabeth 1, and Mrs Pankhurst [6]. All were successful leaders in what they espoused but lacked at least several of those desirable features, plus having some quite undesirable characteristics, such as being a poor listener and authoritarian. One may consider the mysterious quality *charisma* may overcome those undesirable qualities.

The definition given in this present author's text was:

Leadership is a process of directing and influencing the task-related activities of individuals, sometimes singly but much more usually as members of a group in a manner which those concerned find agreeable [7].

THE CAPTAIN'S PROBLEM

So, now this writing comes to Captain Ramirez and what bothered him. The situation in which Clancy involved him and a squad of US soldiers was a clandestine attack on South American drug production and distribution - one may wonder whether this narrative was totally fictitious? Or whether Clancy was suggesting what the US government should be doing? However, aside from all such questions, it makes a good story, it is a good read.

In the lead-up to the action in the South American jungle, a government department has decided to make this attack and has directed the military to gather a suitable group of trained men to form the infiltrating squad, to be led by an NCO (a non-commissioned officer) named Chavez, and commanded by Captain Ramirez. From the viewpoint of this article, there is an immediately interesting question: who is the leader of the squad? Who is the boss? Who is running the show? As matters progress, this becomes the Captain's problem, quandary and dilemma. He becomes, progressively, less and less uncertain where he fits in relative to his NCO.

On the one hand, Chavez is the leader, he is shown as having the abilities and trained skills to do the work ahead of the squad, not only those related to his military prowess with weapons but also in others, such as bushcraft. In addition, as an NCO, a sergeant, he has the necessary standing with the others, so that when he gives an order, vocally, by sign or some other means, it is accepted. Much of the attitude shown to him by the others would be due to their knowing he has worked his way up from private because he is good at everything a soldier at his level must be.

On another hand, Ramirez is the leader because he has been *appointed* as the one-in-charge by those higher up in the military hierarchy, and he has been trained to do a commissioned officer's job. That is not the same as an NCO's job, of course, he would have general training in weapons-related matters, but would not be as skilled in such as those working under him. But his education and training have been to prepare him to be able to analyse whatever situation he has been thrown into, what he is facing and to decide what is the best action to take, then, to pass his decision down through the ranks, so the grunts can do what they have to do. He also has the (perhaps sometimes doubtful) benefit of having higher-level officers above him passing directions to him.

The above reflects heavily on the military's organisation system, a hierarchy based on rank, in which no-one questions an order coming down from higher up. The modern version of this is outlined by Morgan in his reference to the Prussian army of the mid-seventeen-hundreds, which also refers to staff, specialist advisors, distinct from the line of command [7].

So, repeating the question: who is the leader? And that question, by the time a reader reaches the quoted paragraph, has begun to worry Ramirez, because he can tell Chavez is so much smarter than he is, in all the skills needed to perform the task they have been given. His dilemma is, essentially, that he, Ramirez, the *appointed* commander, finds he must defer on many occasions to Chavez, the *de-facto* leader. And, Chavez accepts this by politely (in military terms) interpreting the orders he receives.

Now, another question: who, really, in the squad's activities, is the commander? In the army system, obviously Ramirez is the commander by appointment, as noted above. But when action occurs Chavez is the one who points fingers and whispers instructions to squad members, as well as leading the way, so he is definitely *in command* of the action, by interpreting what Ramirez tells him into orders to the squad. It is quite apparent that Chavez is quite satisfied with this way of working. Ramirez, however, shuffles between satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

This apparent paradox can be resolved by suggesting that Ramirez is in a commander-advisor role and Chavez is in a commander-leader role. That is a very curious mixture, which has not been found in the literature, applicable to the situation in the narrative, but quite likely parallel situations can be found in industry management between, for example, a production manager and a foreman.

This situation all works out very well in the end. Although the squad suffers some casualties they succeed in cutting into the drug trade; in the meantime, there is all sorts of goings-on in Washington with fingers pointed in all directions and confusion, such as only a large collection of large government bodies can achieve.

A CONCLUSION THUS FAR

What does one learn from this well-written tale? Many things, principally that a leader must respond not only to whatever the situation around him demands, but also to whatever the group-being-led requires of him. That awakens the two old theories about leadership, whether there are some who are born-to-be leaders, are figuratively standing in the wings waiting to be called on-stage and are, therefore, available to take the place, which needs them when the need arises. Or whether the combinations of time, conditions and situation generate the need for a leader and also produce the one who is needed. The answer given in this author's text is that the two are really inter-connected in many ways and work together [8].

Returning to the issue announced in the abstract, one also learns, by observing Clancy's situation-juggling, that there is a strong distinction between *leadership*, shown by Chavez who has the squad following him into action as a team, and *commandership*, shown by Ramirez who has the delegated responsibility for results and gives whatever orders are necessary for achieving those results, and also shown by Chavez who has control of the squad's actual actions. The difference may well be described by this: the leader focuses on the task ahead with very narrow vision, but the commander (all being as it should be) has at least three-sixty-degree, preferably spherical, all over and around, vision. And, even though these functions show distinct differences, they are shown working together, each supporting and contributing to the other.

May leadership and commandship be combined? Of course. Even NCOs command, give orders, as one will now see.

ANOTHER, OPPOSITE, CASE

While initially meditating on the inspiration taken from Clancy's novel, a conversation occurred with a woman, met through a complexity of family connections, and in that conversation she mentioned that her son was in the Australian army and was having such a problem with his job he was preparing to resign. This seemed curious, so more details were invited.

The son had entered the army as a private a few years ago and had shown his superiors sufficient promise to be promoted to corporal. This small promotion, to the lowest NCO rank, a leader-rank rather than a commander-rank, put him in charge of a small group, and that (his mother said) was the reason for his starting to fill in discharge papers, apparently an extremely complex task.

That, to this listener, sounded contrary to what one would expect. He was promoted and disliked that recognition so strongly he had to resign? When questioned further, his mother explained: that although he enjoyed much about army life, and the range of activities he experienced, he was now extremely uncomfortable because the promotion put him in charge of others years older than him (he was in his twenties, under twenty-five) and he felt he could not give orders to these older soldiers. After all, they were not only older but most had been in the army for longer than he had.

But an NCO is supposed to be a leader, is not he? Rather than a commander, giving orders? Yes, that is so. But no, he became aware that even a corporal has to give orders to his squad to get them to do what a senior officer has passed down the line. Perhaps the phrasing, the expression, the accompanying body language of the order, the way in which it is given from NCO to privates, is more casual, more suggestive, more of: *Hey, guys, we've got to do so-and-so, let's get on with it*, rather than a blunt: *Do this!* But it is still an order.

The corporal's dilemma is of a much more personal nature than that of Captain Ramirez, although he feels quite competent to perform the position he had before promotion, he does not feel competent to lead a squad because he would have to give them orders. To him, leadership is okay, commandership is not.

The conclusion of this unhappy situation had not become available at this time of writing this article.

ANOTHER, VERY DIFFERENT, CASE

A now-retired engineer began work at apprentice level and moved up through various stages to management, initially as a maintenance engineer in a large process factory, then, to managing both projects and maintenance in a multi-site company. On the way though that he added to his trades qualification by passing the conventional professional examinations to a Bachelor's degree, which was followed over a span of years by higher degrees, so he was well qualified to *command* and *lead* others at both shop-floor and professional levels.

After several years in this mid-management position, he became tired of exercising commandership, of having to give orders to people; he was essentially in Ramirez's position but unfortunately had no-one equivalent to Chavez below him. In parallel, he had become tired of the higher-level management culture, which issued decrees like a medieval pontiff but was deaf to any suggestions or advice from lower down, even from the relatively close mid-management level. All that accumulated into a general sense of dissatisfaction from both sides.

He retired and for a few years worked independently, providing engineering services. Then, there was an opportunity to take an academic position, which he took and spent several years teaching, quite literally leading young engineers into learning certain subjects.

The interesting aspect of this example is that particular person became dissatisfied with being a commander, literally of *being a boss*. That may be unusual, and although a single sample cannot truly statistically prove a hypothesis, it may show that commandership does not agree with an individual's way of thinking, emotions, as those qualities are influenced by, and may change with, time.

COMMENTS ON ENGINEERING EDUCATION

Some people may be born with the inclination to enter engineering at some level, and those who go through the education system to the professional level pick up the conventional leadership concept that those who are responsible for others' actions must *lead*, in parallel with *managing*. However, one must admit the common experience is that much of those activities are picked up by observing others, so much of the practices of leadership and commandership are passed on, generation-to-generation and, one must also admit, often imperfectly.

The distinction, and the importance of both, was expressed in this author's chapter on the leadership topic [8] but at the time of writing that text the idea of commandership had not hit him; the connection explored then was between leadership and motivation, that leaders must motivate their followers. The codicil now attached to that is the commanders must also motivate the leaders under them and that raises the question: how can leading-commanding be included in education for professional engineers? It may be included as a component of a general management subject.

Somehow, by some means, the young and developing engineer needs to be shown there is time when a leader must also be a commander, and that there is nothing wrong with that shift, it is just sometimes how the game must be played.

CONCLUSION

The leadership subject contains at least two dilemmas. One is that most of the literature omits the parallel function, commandership, so one asks: why is it so? That omission is not new, one excellent reference on leadership generally [9], with a title to suit this article, is dated nearly fifty years ago and appears to have no thought that a leader must, sometimes, give commands.

Another is the sensation produced in a leader's mind when the need to give a command occurs, as illustrated by the three examples above, one from an imagined (and realistically written) work of fiction, and two others from the real world.

This author, therefore, suggests that the next person presenting a volume on leadership should give this neglected aspect of the subject adequate attention.

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