Leadership as an Art within the Context of Wicked Social Problems and Collective Leadership Streams

Jay Caulfield

Bret A. Richards

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/mgmt_fac
Part of the Business Commons
Leadership as an Art within the Context of Wicked Social Problems and Collective Leadership Streams

International Leadership Association

Jay Caulfield, Ph.D. & Bret Richards, Ph.D.
Aim of Paper

The aim of this conceptual paper is to construct a definition of the concept, “leadership as an art,” in the context of wicked social problems and collective leadership streams.
Constructing the concept

Leadership as an Art

Distinguish from natural science process

Demonstrate how it's been practiced historically

Relate it to descriptors found in the literature
## Contrast and Comparison

**Leadership as science**
- Systematic and objective inquiry leading to discovery
- Applies linear thinking by using deductive and inductive logic focusing on “what is” or “what should be”
- Reductionist approach
- Past scientific discovery
- May significantly contribute to the common good

**Leadership as art**
- Hermeneutical process of deciding best action to take
- Applies integrative or collective thinking by using abductive logic that focuses “what might be”
- Systems approach
- Practical wisdom
- May significantly contribute to the common good
Campbell and Mendela

• Campbell operated from a systematic and objective reductionist approach, the preferred method for natural scientists

• His discovery of ivermectin saved millions from river blindness and led to his receiving a Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2015

• Mendela operated from a highly contextual holistic approach, the preferred method for systems thinkers

• His knowledge of how existing factions influenced each other gave him leverage to implement restorative justice at a national scale for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993
Identified descriptors for those practicing leadership as an art

– “can change our lives in ways that are as invigorating and real as being it by a wave” (O’Malley, 2012)
– “finding ways to appreciate the current moment while contributing to people and actions that we sense to be toward life” (Schuyler, 2016)
– “creating a healthy world means placing values before objects and morality ahead of expediency” (Hammerschlag, 1993)
– “advocating for those unable to advocate for themselves” (Rowling, 2008)
Realizing the synergies

Wicked Social Problems

Leadership as an Art

Social Systems Networks

Collective Leadership Streams
Wicked Social Problems

- Formulation of the problem is in itself both the problem and its resolution and “quick fixes” often make the problem worse (Rittel & Webber, 1973)
- Kolko (2012) defines a wicked problem as “a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve”
- Due to problem complexity, Grint (2005) identifies the need for collective leadership
- Requires a move from linear to social systems thinking (Norlin, et al., 2013; Stroh, 2015)
  - Knowledge gained in one social system may have significant value to other social systems
  - Means of visualizing complex problems by seeing the relationships between the parts and potentially using them to leverage resolutions
  - Often the best resolutions are achieved by an integrative thought process performed by a group of experts (collective leadership)
Leadership in the Plural (Denis et al., 2012)

• Sharing leadership for team effectiveness
  – collaboration of diverse groups across system boundaries for the purpose of resolving complex public problems for the common good (Crosby and Bryson as cited by Denis et al., 2012)

• Spreading leadership across levels over time
  – dispersion of leadership across boundaries to achieve shared outcomes

• Pooling leadership at the top to lead others
  – ‘executive constellations’, such as dyads and triads who share in the leadership of subordinate groups

• Producing leadership through interaction
  – more about participation and collectively creating vision than it is about control and authority
Definition

Practicing leadership as an art engages and unites a leadership collective in resolving a wicked social problem by constructing its definition, which leads to a compelling purpose supported by a measurable stretch goal that when skillfully and ethically pursued makes a novel and lasting contribution to humanity that is truly extraordinary.
What we discovered

• There is neither a standard template for practicing leadership as an art nor for resolving wicked problems; both are based upon practical wisdom derived from experiential learning and applied to the dynamics of the situation at hand.

• Leadership as an art originates predominantly from a post-heroic perspective as the complexity of wicked social problems are best resolved through collective leadership streams, which are likely complex as well.

• From a critical perspective, leadership as an art predominantly engages in power creation through developing relationships with others versus exerting power over others.

• If we take the approach that leadership is a socially constructed process, then we ought to be able to explore how some leaders are able to make the world a better place more effectively than others (Grint & Jackson, 2010), and we believe that practicing leadership as an art is one of those ways.

• Leadership as an art is not another leadership theory; rather, it pulls from existing theory to inform its practice; its vision and values-based practice requires a highly developed skillset to both accurately interpret dynamic social situations and courageously act in ways that lead to goal fulfillment.
In Conclusion

• Descriptions of leadership as an art had a common theme: Connecting with others to make the world a better place by making novel and lasting contributions to humanity that are truly extraordinary.

• In the words of J.K. Roweling, “The power of human empathy, leading to collective action, saves lives, and frees prisoners. . . We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.”
References


Naseer T (n.d.) Is leadership an art or a science? Available at: https://www.tanveernaseer.com/is-leadership-an-art-or-a-science/ (accessed 6 August 2018).


