

The Fundamental Nature of Leadership:

An Evolutionary Approach

Countless publications, the majority of methods used to identify leadership potential and almost all executive training programmes courageously ignore that the phenomenon of leadership has remained remarkably unexplained. Not surprisingly, this bears a truth well beyond distinctive occurrences and across different cultures.

The point to be made is: During our evolutionary development, **leadership proved to be a successful strategy for survival**. Throughout the ages, this strategy “guided group” – within the scope of evolutionary psychology – has left traces within us. Whoever chooses to ignore these, will never become a successful leader!

Why do some people get followers, others don't?

Successful leaders vary just as much from one another, as ordinary people do. According to current research, the only characteristic that leaders seem to share consistently is the fact that they have voluntary followers. So why do some people have these and others don't?

The question is being approached here from a new perspective, by identifying the probable origin of the phenomenon called ‘leadership’. Why did evolution bother to accept leadership as a valid strategy? What are the functions and advantages of leadership? Admittedly, it's necessary to assume that leadership developed, advanced and embedded itself distinctly in different cultural settings. Even so, certain consistent patterns of perception and behaviour stood the test in an evolutionary context and were not screened out of existence. More importantly, they continue to live within us until today.

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What is the origin of Leadership?

During its dawn, mankind came up with selected mutual promises, which tremendously increased our chances of survival. Parents' mutual promise, to take care of newborns collectively, constitutes a behavioural pattern that is deeply rooted in our genes. Without it, human kind would not exist. Members of our ancestral tribes promised to support each other and joined forces. Without this promise, they could not have survived. For mankind, the statement "There can only be one!" is absolute nonsense.

We know well that evolution has tried and tested many different methods of collaboration, a variety of which are still successful today: Schools of fish, flocks of birds and swarms of insects, hunting partnerships and family units, just to name a few.

Evolution did not require a leader for each and every community it came up with.

It proved to be a very special type of community, in which a group referred to a leader to accomplish a shared objective – and by doing so, was more successful than a group without a leader. If this were not true, the subject of leadership would bear no interest for us today. The strategy would have simply become extinct, discarded by nature.

Mind you: The leadership approach, as a 'best practise' model for survival, had to stand the test in terms of the group, as opposed to the individual. It was the members of the lead group, who collectively maximized their chances of survival, not necessarily that of the leader! Leadership developed only after the task of survival was identified as a shared group objective.

Therefore, the essence of leadership can't possibly be the repeatedly claimed struggle for power and dominance; it was most certainly based on collaboration and cooperation. Initially, the only question was, could this new design for life – with the conflicts of distance vs. proximity, competition vs. cooperation it itself created - prove itself within an evolutionary context? And so it did, merely because our ancestors were able to accomplish more with the help of this new strategy, in comparison to doing things by themselves or in a group lacking leadership.

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What is the key task of leadership?

Leadership is not a specific behaviour, neither is it a skill, nor a trait. **Leadership is a task!** Accomplishing complex tasks requires other people, a division of labour, and brings with it the danger of getting into all sorts of organisational, social and emotional difficulties. It is this balancing act that gave rise to the specialized function of leadership, meaning: To do everything to ensure that “it” (a shared group task) is accomplished successfully! Hence, leadership is one of the most substantial factors that nature has established to define competitive advantages amongst groups of people.

The key task of leadership can be broken down into five distinct sub-tasks:

1. The leader must make sure that he himself has an effective strategy of how the group will succeed (“model of success”).
2. He must ensure that all group members remain constantly aware of the shared group task and that everybody fully understands what needs to be done to accomplish the task (“common reality”).
3. He must ensure that all obstacles along the way are addressed and resolved (“problem solving”).
4. He must ensure that all necessary decisions are made “properly” (“authority”).
5. He must ensure that he does not lose his decisive source of empowerment: the support from his followers (“legitimacy”).

What does this mean for leaders? Leaders need neither be the saviours of mankind, nor are they responsible for a general feeling of well-being. They are no elite group of superheroes. All a leader has to do, is to make sure that the group’s probability of success is higher with him, than without him.

In return, the group will authorise, legitimise and accept him. The appointment of a leader is based on the process of natural selection, by comparison with other alternatives. Therefore, it’s always also about competition.

The evolutionary process dictates that the individual chosen to be the leader is – ... expected to make best use of his competencies and knowledge to ensure

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that the group objective is met (relevance for the group) and – ... able to gain and preserve the legitimacy for his leadership position (tolerability for the group).

The self-concept, which leaders have of themselves, is very much defined by the culture in which they are embedded. It may follow trends, accommodate public opinion or be based on widely accepted theories. Unfortunately, it may also deviate quite substantially from the evolutionary principles determining the leadership phenomenon. And precisely this is a huge problem!

From our point of view, it is of considerable importance, for both management and staff, to understand the fundamental nature of their cooperation. This underlying, common reality must be unambiguous within the concept of an evolutionary approach to leadership. It's precisely this understanding that is reflected in the definition of the specific task at hand: the leader's mission statement and the combined expectations of the followers. A manager, who fails to understand how people "function", within the context of the leadership phenomenon, will have just as serious a problem as those followers, who are unable to grasp the evolutionary implications of leadership.

Do leaders share specific characteristics?

For many years, the quest for identifying distinct leadership traits or seeking explicit leadership behavioural patterns has advanced little on the recurring characterizations of human nature. This should be of no surprise:

Of course our ancestral predecessors made as much use as they could, of any skill and knowledge available, to complete their leadership tasks. There simply are no specific skills distinctive to leadership. Nevertheless, there seems to be evidence, from within the tangled mass of leadership research, for further common characteristics of leaders, apart from the voluntary followers: Apparently, a strong correlation can be found between leadership and intelligence, as well as between leadership and assertiveness. Our perspective offers a simple explanation: Successful leaders must be better than other group members in their "ability to understand the nature of the task they face"

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(intelligence) and their “ability to enforce the right action on the group” (assertiveness) – if not, other members would take on the leadership role. Just to avoid any misunderstanding: It’s neither a question of high-scores in an intelligence test, nor is it a question of a certain measure of assertiveness. It’s all about task-based qualities and functional performance!

Group members consider the leadership function valuable enough to protect the leader, instead of wasting resources in fighting against him. The leader can be sure of his followers’ loyalty, but only for as long as they consider him capable of completing the shared group task. This is the key characteristic constituting leadership.

So who is actually responsible for what?

If it is fundamentally about accomplishing a shared group task, all group members must know who is responsible for what. The evolutionary understanding of leadership suggests the following “natural” division:

– The *overlying goals* are defined from within the group itself! The memberships are established in light of the definition of shared group goals. Once established, only top management can modify or change them. Those who don’t agree with the goals will leave the group sooner or later – at least mentally (“internal resignation”). A skilled hunting group consists of individuals capable and willing to hunt! Tourists should not be amongst them.

– The *strategic approach* is based on the leader’s attitude on how to be successful, his specific model of success. The leader is the incarnation of this promise, valid for the entire group. It’s in the leader’s own interest to make sure that he puts all the required experience and knowledge into his specific model. He must also secure the Success-Model-Supremacy; after all, it’s the fundamental reason for him being appointed by the group in the first place. The experienced hunter leads the group, and decides what action will be taken. Should his decisions not lead to success, “legitimizing points” are deducted from his leadership account.

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- The *responsibility for identifying* improvements lies – again, in everyone’s interest – with each individual group member. It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to withhold information, and everyone pays a high toll on power struggles within the group. Those who loose sight of the shared group goals, whilst trying to “triumph” over other group members, risk scaring away the prey – and all members risk going home empty handed and hungry.
- The *concluding evaluation of alternatives* is the sole responsibility of the leader. Subsequently, he alone makes the necessary decisions and thereby reinstates his specific model of success. It’s the leader who decides from which side the attack on the prey is launched. If his decision does not lead to success, the group will deduct additional “legitimizing points”.
- The responsibility for the *implementation of the specific decisions* will, however, always rest in the hands of the most talented and capable members of the group. The fastest runner tracks the prey; the most accurate throws the spear.
- A leader cannot avoid taking on overall responsibility! He must ensure that everything is running smoothly and he needs to maintain the option of getting involved anytime. Every single involvement will influence his “legitimizing balance”, depending on whether his influence leads to success or failure. If hunting is repeatedly unsuccessful, the reason becomes less and less important: The level of discontent within the group rises and new “hunting leadership talents” will emerge.

What does that mean for your company?

From an evolutionary perspective, companies are nothing else but social systems, whose purpose is to increase the likelihood of (economic) survival of its members. This is, undoubtedly, not a trivial responsibility.

The following two issues have consistently created difficulties for companies:

- lack of a common reality.
- leaders providing little or no track record of success.

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Reality provides us with extensive evidence demonstrating how immensely manifold, controversial and even destructive the cooperation between management and staff can be. In many cases, the basic conflict is caused by a missing common reality defining leadership and following. On the basis of evolutionary psychology, we assume that the “essence of leadership” is not something to be negotiated, neither does it result from workshops, nor emerge from in-depth discussions.

Even though it should seem a little silly by now, numerous companies still continuously redefine their basic principles of leadership in highly complicated development programmes and chew up valuable resources in the process. Apart from the fact that the results are always very much identical every single time, the existence of natural principles of leadership are ignored consecutively. Instead of continuously reinventing the wheel, we recommend starting a thorough discussion on the basic principles of evolutionary leadership inside of companies, with everyone involved, not just management.

Would companies jeopardise their unique identity when everyone follows this advice? No! An athlete doesn't limit himself by referring to the fundamentals of biophysics; on the contrary, he will most certainly identify new and improved methods to increase his performance.

The character, the style and the uniqueness of an organisation are not threatened whatsoever.

One substantial challenge that does seem to persist in being very demanding for companies: the search for, identification and selection of leaders. The difficulty here may, in effect, turn out to be a simple misunderstanding.

The leadership task, as it was defined earlier, is often mistaken for another. One that has gained considerably in importance: the task of developing a career. The strategies and methods required to advance an individual career are, regrettably, hardly ever identical to those required to lead successfully. The unfortunate fact remains that they both involve very similar skill-sets and performances.

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Just for reminders:

Good leadership is not defined by what a person is capable of doing. It's defined by what a person chooses to do with his capabilities. The evolutionary approach to leadership explicitly validates the possibility of having an outstanding competencies profile whilst being a dreadful leader. Successful careerists very often even develop individual models of success that may actually contradict leadership objectives. This aspect should be addressed with a greater intensity when recruiting and developing leadership talents.

It is absolutely logical that people adjust their own behaviour, to match those elements that they experienced as determining career moves with others. Companies should therefore monitor their homemade "career rules", just to make sure that they do not oppose the evolutionary leadership principles.

Is the evolutionary approach to leadership valid?

A good theory can be expected capable of integrating existing findings and making some novel predictions.

Furthermore, scientific research must lend itself to testing. Here are some assumptions concerning the evolutionary approach to leadership needing some verification:

- The fact that leadership is a group-based phenomenon implies the unfeasibility of individual leadership skills and competencies.
- A successful boss will always be better at fulfilling the key evolutionary task than anyone else in the group.
- If this is not the case, legitimacy issues will be abundant.
- Leadership training and management education concentrating on transmitting "tools" will not perform as well, as those concepts aligning participants to accomplish the key tasks of evolutionary leadership.
- Management diagnostics relying on ideal or target leadership profiles will prove to be less valid than those, which allow for individual models of success
- To succeed in the leadership task.
- Research that distinguishes between career and leadership objectives will provide results of higher value.

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CEO Worldwide Discussion File

These examples should be enough to show that the evolutionary approach to leadership is by no means just an additional “packaging” of already acclaimed wisdom. For one, it allows us to bring structure into the vast field of subjects, which are erroneously associated with leadership. In addition, it allows us to deduce hands-on implications, which in their turn increase the probability reaching objectives shared by leaders and followers.

Michael Alznauers Book “Evolutionary Leadership” (Gabler) has been nominated “book of the week” by the Hamburger Abendblatt.

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