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Chapter 4

We Are Asking the Wrong Question about Leadership: The Case for 'Good-Enough' Leadership

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

This chapter presents the argument that leadership is not always effective, even though we know a great deal about what makes leadership effective. Consequently, we are asking the wrong question when we inquire into what makes leadership effective. A more interesting question is that when we know so much about effective leadership, why are leaders sometimes unable to exercise effective leadership? Why do not they do as they should? The answer discussed here is that leadership is often ineffective because people are imperfect, including leaders. Therefore, there are individual and organisational barriers to effective leadership, as well as constraints in the environment. Better education and training programmes for leaders, as well as more robust and transparent methods of recruitment and selection of leaders, may remedy this to some extent. But it is perhaps more important to accept the fact that leadership is often ineffective and that we should settle for 'good enough'. This perspective offers us the opportunity to investigate the barriers to effective leadership and what may be done to reduce them. This is a better way forward for researchers and practitioners than the present dominating focus within leadership literature on unobtainable ideals involving flawless acts carried out by perfect human beings operating in rational organisational environments.

Keywords: ineffective leadership, imperfect, biases, irrationality, 'good enough'

1. Introduction

People are capable of great things, but they are also imperfect. The Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck [1] wrote in his novel, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, that 'there is a strange duality in the human which makes for an ethical paradox'. Steinbeck goes on to say that human societies tend to share more or less universal descriptions of good and bad human qualities;

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that is, the good qualities are often associated with 'wisdom, tolerance, kindliness, generosity and humility; and the qualities of cruelty, greed, self-interest, graspingness and rapacity are universally considered undesirable'. However, in some contexts in modern society, the people who possess those so-called 'bad' qualities are successful, while those who possess the 'good' qualities fail, he argues. Steinbeck continues that 'perhaps no other animal is so torn between alternatives. Man might be described fairly adequately, if simply, as a two-legged paradox'. Following Steinbeck's argument, we might also refer to the Latin expression: *Errare humanum est* which translates into English as to err is human. But in the leadership literature; however, the focus is not on 'to err' and not always even on 'human', but on people's strengths, their good qualities and their potential, and it tells us what will result in effective leadership. Leaders should achieve goals with efficient use of resources, while at the same time conserving and developing resources. Yet in reality, this is not always the case. This book looks at dysfunctional leadership. Dysfunctional leadership often consists of behaviour that is controlling, autocratic, arrogant, reckless, critical, and that uses threats, lies and distortion, as well as appealing to people's bad consciences [2]. Dysfunctional leadership has therefore been examined by researchers from both psychoanalytic [3–10], as well as from critical, perspectives [10–19].

Leadership is sometimes effective, sometimes dysfunctional and sometimes ineffective; however, it is the latter that is most common in everyday organisational life. Even though the literature in the field of leadership includes normative prescriptions for what leaders should do, leaders often do not act as they should; consequently, there is a disparity between rhetoric and reality [20–31]. The simple explanation is that there are barriers to effective leadership, such as environmental, organisational and personal ones. I will therefore argue in this chapter that leadership is not always, and more often than we like to believe, effective. It is thus important to understand what the barriers to effective leadership are and what can be done to minimise these, at both individual and organisational levels. This issue deserves more attention and will provide an important contribution to further research and understanding of the leadership phenomenon. It is also important for leaders to have something other than unattainable ideals and normative models to relate to. Consequently, the premise in this chapter is that we are asking the wrong question about leadership. The more pertinent question is if we know so much about what constitutes effective leadership, why do not leaders exercise more effective leadership in organisations?

2. Human beings are imperfect

Human beings are imperfect, this we know. People may certainly be described as unique and special, yet they are nevertheless imperfect. There seem to be no limit to what the human brain can solve regarding practical and theoretical problems; however, regarding its limitations, the brain is poorly equipped to understand itself. Simply put, it is not so difficult to trick the brain, and the brain is also capable of tricking itself. Consider, for instance, the effects of mental shortcuts that the brain uses to produce decisions or judgements. Such cognitive biases take on a variety of forms and affect beliefs, decision making and behaviour in general. Such biases are studied in psychology and behavioural economics, and the cause

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is commonly attributed to theoretical explanations such as bounded rationality, attribution theory, cognitive dissonance and heuristics [32–39]. In general, biases arise from too much information, not enough understanding, the need to act quickly, the limits of memory and information processing capacity, emotional and moral motivations, as well as social influence. Some examples are people who rely too much on a single piece of information when making decisions; or they self-reinforce collective beliefs; or they opt for risk-seeking choices in order to avoid negative outcomes. Other biases are more of a social nature such as the tendency to be influenced by authority figures and to give preferential treatment to those perceived to be members of own group. People's memories are also biased, for example, people often retroactively ascribe choices as being better informed than they were when they were made.

Individuals create their reality from their perception of the input. The construction of reality governs people's behaviour. Thus, such biases may lead to perceptual distortion, inaccurate judgement, illogical interpretation or what is broadly called irrationality. It needs to be said that such biases may lead to more effective actions in a given context, as well as faster decisions when timeliness is more valuable than accuracy. However, the fact that humans are not only rational, utility-maximising individuals, but also have [often contradictory] wishes, internal conflicts, defensive mechanisms, as well as feelings such as anxiety, insecurity, fear, anger and pain—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—is only to a small extent discussed in leadership literature [40]. Good intentions do not amount to anything, because of forces affecting people's behaviour preventing them from being effective. If we are to understand why people do not always do what they should, then we must understand the conflicts, protection mechanisms, tensions and feelings that affect behaviour. Most people are equipped with a defensive structure that controls impulses, thoughts and ideas. Common defensive reactions include projection, denial, displacement, repression, rationalisation and extended use of humour. Defensive structures operate outside of consciousness, and people may not be aware that something which they do create reactions in other people, since they are blind to such disorders. Human behaviour is also driven by unconscious motivations and needs which determine people's operational codes. These systems are shaped by innate and learned response patterns, the role of significant caretakers and how the individual recreates positive emotional states in infancy and childhood. During childhood, mental schemas that regulate behaviour emerge as a result of these [41–44]. When needs are not taken care of, negative and eventually overwhelming emotions may develop, which can give rise to a wide range of ailments and symptoms. Such internal forces are rational in isolation, but may lie behind behaviour that may be considered irrational.

Emotions correspond to a distinct and dedicated neurological circuit, and contain processing of the body's signals and are not just hormonal impulses, but are based on assumptions of what will happen [45, 46]. When people feel pain, fear and other difficult feelings, these emotions thus have a purpose—they help them deal with social or physical dangers. During the course of maturation processes, people develop particular schemes in their inner world that reflect important wishes and contribute to their personalities. These schemes translate into the patterns by which they relate to others [47] and people bring such schemes into the context of workplace relationships. They project their wishes on others, and anticipate how others will react. This may result in ineffective behaviour such as conflict avoidance, micro-management, manic behaviour,

inaccessibility and internal politicking. People also create psychosocial immune systems to protect and preserve their belonging and standing in the groups upon which they depend [48]. This system keeps those emotions outside their awareness that they may find too threatening, embarrassing or shameful to expose to others. Even though people may desire a more effective and open interaction with others, they may avoid experiences that might expose them to vulnerability. The risks of losing value in others' eyes, losing power, losing status and losing membership of a social group thus govern interaction between people, and result in ineffective action and counter-action. The implication of this somewhat darker side of human behaviour is that people often misperceive situations and conversations and act in inappropriate ways. Disciplines such as psychodynamics, but also psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, developmental psychology and neuropsychology, contribute to an understanding of the above [41, 49–52]. The premises in such fields are that a considerable portion of the regulation of people's behaviour takes place outside the domain of conscious awareness. This gives rise to defensive reactions, innate response patterns and scripts that in many cases have outlived their effectiveness. The result may be that people withdraw from difficult discussions, they close themselves off or they use different types of destructive behaviour in their interaction with others. This is related to Freud's [53] most enduring idea about the 'battle' between the conscious and unconscious mind.

3. Imperfect organisations

Imperfect people work in organisations, which means that work organisations on a system level also experience short-circuits, processing errors, conflicts, protection mechanisms and tensions, and are affected by people's emotions and needs. Imperfections at the individual level adds up to the system level, but is also held in check by institutional practices, collective processes, values and norms. An organisation is a social system that is deliberately designed to realise certain goals, and behaviour and processes in organisations are the result of constructed realities [54–56]. One might think that people in organisations act rationally and that organisations collectively process activities cognitively. However, this is not necessarily the case. Alvesson and Spicer [57] point to the limits of rationality and knowledge in organisations, which they claim is due to power and internal politics. The symbolic aspects of organisational life are emphasised, instead of the substantive. Manipulation of symbols and exercise of power block effective communication and action.

3.1. Organisations are not always rational

To describe some of people's behaviour in organisations, Morgan [58] uses archetypal metaphors such as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems and psychic prisons. In the metaphors political systems and psychic prisons, there are relationships other than the rational that affect interaction—a consequence of people being imperfect, as discussed above. This fallibility also emerges in organisational life. Morgan also compares organisations to living organisms; the latter are concerned with survival. Similarly, employees in organisations have needs that must be satisfied, in order for them to function well. Organisations are also political systems where people have different interests. Conflict is inherent and fostered by beliefs,

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mental programming, stereotyping or arising from competition for scarce resources. Finally, organisations may be regarded as psychic prisons, where people are trapped by their incomplete understanding of reality, by their successes or failures or by groupthink. According to Morgan, unconscious processes trap people and lead to ineffective interaction. Processes are not rational and barriers hinder efficiency. Organisational processes is, therefore, not only a result of rational actions, but include complications and unforeseen events characterised by the results achieved, but also by mistakes, resistance, ambivalence, cynism, lack of trust, conflict and political games [59–61]. Organisational reality is thus characterised by a high degree of complexity that makes it difficult to order, organise, influence and thereby lead. The idyllic picture painted by leadership literature is often at odds with the messy and imperfect organisational reality. Also, an organisation's environment influences its processes and the order that emerges through interaction and negotiation. Organisations are affected by the environment, just as organisations affect the environment. This mutually dependent relationship is characterised by resource transactions, exchange, impact, legitimacy and uncertainty. Organisations are thus targeted by a number of forces making claims and demands on operations and development. Such external pressures and internal conditions are often much more significant than any specific actions carried out by powerful individuals [62, 63]. These forces may range from broader economic, legal and social constraints impacting business cycles, regulations or ethical standards, to concrete market demands that organisations need to acknowledge. Much has been written about how globalisation, technology development, ecology and demographic changes affect; how society develops, markets work, businesses are organised and leadership is exercised. Transparency, information speed and technology development create discontinuity, restlessness and short-termism. These are fundamentally different conditions from the continuity and long-term perspective which in some cases are needed in order to lead organisations effectively.

3.2. Why do we follow leaders?

One may argue that leadership and followership is a basic human behaviour [64, 65]. Human beings are social animals, and certain features of the human condition make leadership and followership necessary. The processes whereby people lead and follow have emerged over the course of human evolution to deal with the need to coordinate issues within small groups [66]. Van Vugt and colleagues [67] note the fact that people lived for a period of 2.5 million years in small equitable communities has had an effect on how people relate to leadership. The human mind still employs the mechanisms used by early man in order to solve problems geared towards improving the survival and reproduction of the species. These mechanisms include skills, which were needed as groups consolidated and coordinated their actions, as well as resolving conflicts, punishing outliers, waging war and teaching and promoting social cohesion [68]. The patterns of leadership and followership support the contention that both these have evolved psychological mechanisms to deal effectively with coordination problems associated with group life, and conflict and competition both within, and between, groups [69–71]. Selection theory suggests that most people are flexible enough to be either a leader or follower, and they make their choices according to context and situational variables. Others, more controversially, propose that evolution produces an optimal and stable ratio of leaders and followers in a population [72, 73]. Evolutionary psychologists thus argue that people are

conditioned for leadership and followership. Is this the case? Why is someone inclined to follow someone else—willing to subject themselves to direction from others? One explanation is that leadership may be a product of the followers' need for leadership. They need someone to take on the responsibility for the group. One of several ways whereby people manage their fears and anxieties is by following people that somehow confirm their worldview, making them feel part of something larger than themselves [74, 75]. Also, several studies have shown that people follow authority figures, whether it is formal or informal authority, and people's amenability to organisational imperatives that make them inclined to obedience [76–78]. In addition, people follow others because they have preconceptions regarding the characteristics and behaviors that are preferable for them to follow—they think it pays off [79, 80]. People categorise other people as being a person they will follow or not to the extent that their traits and behaviours match prototypical characteristics they see as being favourable [81]. Once categorised as someone to follow, people's internal schemas lead them to perceive and encode information about the other person's effectiveness that fits with their schemas. Another explanation is that people expect leadership when they feel vulnearable [82]. When someone is needed to take charge of a challenging situation, people are more likely to follow the person who can influence the specific situation [83]. Interaction between people tends to be governed by practical situations, rather than by prior considerations. People follow those who can react in any given situation that emerges, and who are able to identify what needs to be done next [84]. Finally, social identity theory suggests that people's self-concepts and self-esteem are strongly influenced by the group to which they belong [85, 86] meaning that their social identity is a function of the group to which they belong. These social identities include prototypes that characterize the group that belongs to and which distinguishes it from other groups. When someone strongly matches such prototypical properties, people in the group identify more strongly with that person [87, 88]. Highly prototypical group members are thus more influential than less prototypical members, and more likely to lead others, as they are more liked, their status is higher, they are more trusted and they are perceived to behave in a more group-serving manner.

4. What does research teach us about effective leadership?

Psychology has been influential in the field of leadership research. The literature includes theories and findings regarding effective leadership. There are, however, no clear definitions of what is meant by effectiveness, although reference is made to the extent to which the performance of a group or organisation is improved and objectives reached [89–91]. Many claim that effective leadership depends on a combination of, and the interaction between personal and situational attributes [91]. The field of psychology thus provides us with normative answers to the question of what constitutes effective leadership important for the development of society, organisations and groups. We want the foremost and the best suited to lead us. However, if we accept the premise that people are imperfect, then so are leaders. What is leadership research's response as how to minimise imperfect leaders leading organisations, so that we can minimise ineffective leadership?

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4.1. Leaders have the characteristics needed for the job

Individual leaders are commonly selected and chosen based on characteristics such as personality traits, characteristics, behaviour, values, skills, competencies, ambitions, capacity, experience and past results. Individual-oriented research within leadership has listed many attributes that are deemed relevant to leadership. This includes personality traits such as self-confidence, extroversion, emotional maturity, conscientiousness and agreeableness [92–94], as well as effective behaviour relevant to leadership [95], including, for example, task/relationship-orientation [96], change-orientation [96] and transformational leadership [97]. Values are another category when selecting leaders; leaders should have the 'right' or politically correct values. Values are internalised attributes of what is considered right or wrong, ethical or unethical and moral and immoral. Examples include fairness, honesty, freedom, equality, loyalty and excellence. Various configurations of self-concepts are also a common parameter for selecting leaders and typically include self-identity, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-mastery and self-worth. Skills are yet another category often discussed when somebody is singled out for leadership positions, and refers to the ability to do something in an effective manner. Leadership skills commonly include: (i) technical skills such as knowledge about methods, processes, procedures and techniques, (ii) interpersonal skills such as having knowledge of human behaviour, inter- and intrapersonal processes, and also what may be called [iii] conceptual skills such as analytical ability, logical thinking, critical thinking and problem solving [98–101]. However, selecting and choosing leaders based on individual capabilities is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to find causal links between a leader's individual attributes and effective leadership. Moreover, characteristics that may be useful in one situation may not be useful in a different situation. Furthermore, two leaders with different attributes can be successful in the same situation. A particular type of leadership behaviour may therefore be characterised as being good or bad, depending on the different outcomes. Thus, context also plays a role; other factors such as the specific industry, as well as cyclical differences, can determine which characteristics can result in effective leadership.

4.2. Leaders influence interaction

Given that most definitions of leadership concern influence, then it should be assumed that influencing is one of the most important things that leaders do. Yet, there are many sources of influence in organisations. Employees in organisations are influenced by their leaders, clearly, but also by colleagues, customers, the working environment, organisational structure, organisational culture, subcontractors, markets, systems, procedures and rules, as well as by external events and unforeseen circumstances. Thus, it is difficult to specify what is due to effective leadership when results are achieved. Blom and Alvesson [102] emphasise the dynamics between leaders and followers. They propose using the expression 'leadership on request' to emphasise situation dependency and the importance of context. Leadership is therefore a more collective phenomenon than individual-led leadership researchers propose, and is a function of actions and interactions within dyadic and network interlinkages [103–105]. It is the importance of leadership, not the leader, which is crucial, representing a refocus from presumed extraordinary individuals to what ordinary people accomplish as they interact.

Leadership are thus not solely dependent on one person—a leader—to mobilise action on behalf of others, but rather on a process that emerges *in situ*, in the situation, and in social interactions, deploying itself via different activities. When relationships between leaders and employees are established, it may also be unclear whether it is the leader or employee[s] who exercise leadership. That is, whether a co-worker/employee can act as a leader and the leader act as a co-worker will often depend on the tasks being performed, where leadership will be divided between members of a team or other organisational units [106].

4.3. Leaders are selected

There are sources of error in the methods used to internally or externally select or recruit leaders. A recent study by Rogstad and Sterri [107] shows some of these. There are parameters other than formal competence and documented experience which play a role when appointing leaders. It constitutes a source of error when recruiters, who are also prone to errors of judgment, believe that they are a good judge of character. They commonly have preconceptions regarding characteristics and behaviors that they deem to be leadership qualities, as well as attributing characteristics to others according to their own schemas, beliefs and values. Assessment of potential leaders is often based to a great extent on arbitrary discretion, and the indeterminate ability of those appointing leaders. There are usually few objective criteria for discretionary decisions and, decisions are often not transparent. It is also the case that leaders are selected and recruited on the basis of internal promotion, that is, candidates considered to be suitable are appointed to a more senior position. However, what is regarded as 'suitable' is often vague and unclear. It may be the case that candidates who are good at positioning themselves, and projecting that they have 'what it takes' are those who are promoted. Pfeffer [20] emphasises this aspect when he claims that it seems that good performance is not always enough. He therefore ironically recommends that people with ambitions should project their power and success, as they then are likely to be singled out as 'leadership material' and rise up through the ranks.

4.4. Leaders and moral values

An examination of the language used in descriptions of leadership yields insights which may be found in attribution and implicit theories of leadership. Many scholars seem to write as if they are describing actual leaders, but on closer examination they are prescribing leadership ideals [108], which often implicitly or explicitly include high moral values. Philosophers throughout history have emphasised moral values in their ideas about leaders. Leaders must be morally brave and able to stand up for their principles as a common argument, but this seems to be ideal that many leaders have difficulty living up to [109]. *Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power*, said the 16th American president, Abraham Lincoln. Power may corrupt leaders, and studies have shown that leaders seem to believe that if they have power, they can cross moral boundaries, grant themselves benefits, adopt double standards or set higher demands for others than they do for themselves [110]. Power can also go to leaders' heads: they may feel that they control more than they actually do, and they can overestimate themselves and their actions [111]. Philosophy literature chronicles the history of human ideals and aspirations. These ideals and aspirations are embedded in the language we use when making sense of leadership; in many cases, the

word 'leader' has a built-in normative aspect to it, meaning that a leader only leads if he or she possesses high moral values or meets certain ethical standards. Organisational dilemmas, market conditions and strategic choices are, however, rarely black and white—exercising leadership often concerns navigating through shades of gray. Human behaviour has the capacity for great variation, and although we may have inherent moral values, human behaviour often adjust itself according to the current perception of what is normal and acceptable [112]. Subsequently, people are able to show good and bad sides of themselves depending on the situation, their ability to understand the situation and the culture they are part of; and that ability is not always optimal, given human limitations and barriers.

4.5. What ever the problem, leadership is the solution

Common explanatory models of effective leadership include the trait approach, the style approach, the situational approach, neo-charismatic theories, such as charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership and contemporary relationship-oriented leadership styles. Some of these have been subject to criticism, but they still have support within the academic community. They prescriptively define qualities of leaders, or explain that leaders should be able to choose the right style or type of action depending on the situation and the people involved, and, based on this, exercise effective leadership so that organisational objectives are reached. Alternative approaches are becoming more current, for example, within critical and practice-oriented approaches to leadership. But, such studies are still relatively few; the great volume of leadership theory focuses on a presumed causality between individual qualities and actions, and organisational results. Also, the amount of theory produced has grown significantly in the past four decades. It is a 'leadership theory industry'. The major players are reputable business schools and large international consulting companies. They live off developing and selling new theories and tools for a growing market. This leadership industry is hence a self-reinforcing one. Leaders, head hunters, consultants, media, leadership developers and researchers have a mutual interest in creating interest in the phenomenon of leadership, as well as inflating the importance of leadership. In her book *The End of Leadership*, Kellerman [113] thus confronts leadership as a phenomenon—and the leadership industry's inflated understanding of the profession. Kellerman claims that we must stop believing that everyone can lead; that better leadership is the solution to every problem; and that everyone can become leaders by completing expensive leadership development programs offered by consulting companies or business schools. There are several ways to organise organisational work, leadership is just one of them. And, leadership is not always the solution, but sometimes the problem if one rely too much on this.

5. The case for 'good-enough' leadership

Can we teach and train leaders so they lead more effectively in order to remedy ineffective leadership? Many think so, but this premise needs to be further qualified. Firstly, there is a difference between learning and teaching, and learning to be a leader is about learning how to become a leader in situated experiential contexts. Leaders are commonly educated and

trained to cope with leadership tasks through formal education or development programmes. However, in many organisations, opportunities are not always provided to facilitate learning, experience-sharing and optimal learning arenas. There may be too little time for reflection, too few opportunities for risk-free testing of new knowledge and behaviour, as well as a lack of creating room for new insights that challenge current practices. Moreover, most popular MBA programmes offered at business schools have a strong focus on operational and functional competencies, although they are often framed in terms of leadership [114]. In 2005, Bennis and O'Toole wrote in an influential article in the *Harvard Business Review* that the methods that are used for teaching leadership at many schools are 'useful, necessary, even enlightening. But because they are at arms' lengths from actual practice, they often fail to reflect the way business works in real life' ([115], p. 99). In the literature about the subject, and in training programmes, leadership is commonly presented as an ordered and controllable activity, but many of these models are of limited use in real life situations, where leaders have to cope with divergent demands, complexity and uncertainty. Leadership takes place in environments where there are a multitude of conflicting expectations, and a leader's work is more likely to be characterised by uncertainty, fragmentation and a hectic pace, than by order and control [29]. Consequently, there may be too much emphasis on teaching leadership in functionalistic ways predicated on essentialist, rationalist and individualist assumptions [116]. The rhetoric of leadership tends to be universal, but leadership programmes and educations are commonly designed around technical and functional expertise, a reflection of the dominance of positivist research which privileges rationality, quantification and techniques in order to identify universal models. Such models, however, ignore the complex lived experience of those supposedly learning to become leaders. Learning to lead is also about learning how to learn. This involves some form of disruption to ways of thinking and acting, where taken-for-granted assumptions, practices and competing discourses must be acknowledged and supported—a process that may begin in the classroom, but that must be extended outside to leaders' own lived experiences. Learning leadership—in contrast to teaching leadership—is thus framed as a more experiential process that often involves forms of vulnerability and disruptions [117, 118].

Effective leadership seem to be an ideal that is difficult to realise. Work environment surveys show that 60–70% of employees experience stress in relation to communication with their managers [25]. Meanwhile, around 60% of managers in the US fail in their roles [27]. Ineffective leadership may explain why only 30% of employees are committed to their work, while 50% are uncommitted and 20% may be characterised as 'unproductive' [27]. A poll of workers in the UK found that only 43% of employees were fully engaged in their work [28]. Another recent UK survey showed that 70% of employees had left a job because of an incompetent manager and that 54% of those surveyed had at some point had a problem with their manager's leadership style [28]. In Norway, a large survey revealed that 34% of employees were not satisfied with the performance of their managers [30]. There seems to be a mismatch between the idealised leadership realities referred to in theories of leadership and real life leaders' everyday work situations [21, 29, 119–122]. Moreover, everyday life in most organisations is characterised by ineffective leadership. Leadership is not ineffective because leaders intentionally abuse their power, behave destructively or otherwise sabotage good interaction between people, but ineffective because humans are imperfect—even though they may have the best intentions of making their contribution towards achieving the organisation's objectives.

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Researchers who have addressed the above have various suggestions. Birkinshaw [22] states that leaders should make the best of an imperfect world. He argues that leaders should develop awareness: of what employees need, of their own biases and limitations and of how their organisations function. He notes that this will require a considerable amount of self-discipline and personal development. Alvesson and colleagues [23] argue the case for more reflexive leadership. They say that part of the problem is caused by leaders relying on simple recipes and concepts that are more likely to create problems. The researchers say that what is needed are leaders who can think independently and use their own judgment, and who are sensitive to and open-minded about local processes—and then act accordingly. Tengblad and his co-researchers [29] think that leaders must be better at dealing with complexity and avoiding paralysis. They suggest that leaders develop an experimental and learning attitude of how to deal with messiness, and that they learn to work with risk management issues. They also propose that leaders should be more aware of the hidden aspect of leadership. By this they mean the confusion, emotions, politicking, dubious ethics and selfish behaviour often found in organisations. Kellerman [113] refrains from giving any specific advice, but says that leadership is in danger of becoming obsolete. Her suggestion is to end the leader-centrism that the leadership industry seems to love. This is in line with the ideas of researchers such as Raelin [104] who argue that leadership is not dependent on any single person to mobilise action on behalf of everybody else, it is rather a collective accomplishment. It is not cognition as an isolated condition located within the mind of the leader that mobilises leadership, but the interaction with the environment through both individual and collective sensorimotor processing. Pfeffer [20] has a similar line of argumentation and points to some of the disconnections between what leaders say and what they do; between prescriptions and reality; between the multidimensional nature of leadership performance and the simple answers many people seek, and between what would make organisations more effective and the rate at which such prescriptions are implemented. Pfeffer thus argues that such disconnections serve powerful interests and that they tend to make leaders unaccountable for messed up workplaces, poor performance and bad behaviour. To restore some of these connections, leaders should keep themselves grounded in the realities of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Following the above, Storch and Shotter [123] hence claim that there are no ideal forms of leadership. They suggest instead the notion of 'good-enough leadership', that describes the process whereby individuals respond to other people's needs and the 'tryings' and 'failings' of people's interactions in doing this.

What if we disregard the ideal of effective leadership, and agree with Storch and Shotter that 'good-enough leadership' is what is needed? This implies accepting the premise that most people are imperfect and that the reality most leaders face is demanding, leading to a gap between realities and ideals. This means that researchers and practitioners need to lower expectations of what leaders can accomplish. The concept of leadership is inflated—many romanticise about leadership and they want heroes who can sort things out for them [124]. This does not happen in everyday organisational life, except perhaps in the world of airport leadership literature. If we set aside such ideals, leadership research can, to a greater extent, be based on the reality faced by most leaders, and an examination of the barriers to effective leadership. For leadership research, this will entail more use of methodologies such as shadowing, action-based research, ethnographies, time-bound observations, informal interviews, as well as use of multi-methods and triangulation, and data collection including video-taping, blogs, diaries and critical incidents.

Leadership research then also has to include the doings of leadership, and should investigate questions such as what is leadership work, how is leadership work done, what constitutes common barriers to leadership, and what can be done to remove these? This will open up the possibility of fresh understandings of the barriers to effective human interaction.

For leaders, this is liberating, in so much as they would not need to focus on unattainable ideals. Developing oneself based on one's strengths, but also on one's weaknesses, and doing one's best to improve, as well as accepting some of one's own faults, is a more effective strategy for most leaders. Becoming aware of their barriers and doing what they can to minimise them is a better way forward that triggers personal and professional development. Developing oneself requires self-insight, honesty about oneself and the will to work with one's own patterns over time. This may lead to leaders developing an awareness of their own practices, and the organisational practices they are part of. This is the best advice that can be given, along with lowering expectations as to how much they can achieve as leaders within a limited timeframe. And what about employees, what is good enough for them? Certainly, as Gabriel [125] argues, employees may want a leader who cares for his/her followers, who is accessible, who is omnipotent and omniscient or who has a legitimate claim to lead others, perhaps because they themselves as employees have high expectations of their own performance. However, such wishes are problematic as there is a gap between the words and actions of leaders and how employees experience leadership in practice [22]. It breeds an underlying cynicism: a sense that leaders are out of touch with reality and therefore not to be fully trusted. Such cynicism creates a dangerous disconnection between leaders and employees—a disconnection between ideals and reality. A recent study of 3500 employees in Norway investigated how leadership influenced job satisfaction over time [126]. The researchers surprisingly found that a good leader did not necessarily increase job satisfaction. Employees took leadership for granted as long as the leader avoided laissez-faire behaviour. This type of leadership behaviour was stress-inducing as well as demotivating. The researchers also found that passive and active destructive forms of leadership seem to have a stronger influence over time than constructive forms. The picture is obviously mixed, but in many cases, avoiding laissez-faire behaviour is perhaps the best answer to what is good enough. Leaders should clear away obstacles so employees can do their job. Accepting that there are not always clear answers. Accepting that one as a leader can say that he or she does not know what to do. Binney and colleagues [127] claim that vulnerability is a key element in leading, but this is not easy. Too much vulnerability and a leader is of no use to others, no vulnerability and employees will not engage with them. Holmberg and Tyrstrup [84] have argued that the most typical everyday leadership situation experienced by leaders is one the researchers label 'well then—what now?' This is a problem-oriented situation where leaders are not certain how they got there, where they stand and what the situation means. It is hard for them to assess how the situation fits with previous intentions, to tell what has been completed, to understand what is going on or to figure out what is still to be accomplished. Nevertheless, leaders still need to act, and, at least, to identify the next step in the process. Moreover, this is good enough. Can a leader accept their own shortcomings while at the same time be good enough in the eyes of the employees? Yes, it is imperative that a leader accepts their own imperfections, as well as being aware of their strengths; this is the only way a leader can minimalize some of their own barriers for effective leadership. People want to be led by human beings, not flawless superheroes. Obviously, there

is a risk associated with such a strategy, but it is a greater risk that the concept of leadership is further and further detached from the realities most people in organisations experience, if we do not deflate the concept. Then it will be 'the end of leadership' as Kellerman postulates [113]. Leadership is certainly demanding, and developing oneself as a leader is challenging, and a process that requires trial and error, where there is no universal blueprint. It is not always possible to facilitate optimal learning arenas in the workplace; especially not for leaders who have a hectic workday. There may be little time for reflection, few opportunities for risk-free testing of new knowledge and practices, and little opportunity to gain new insights that can challenge current practices. Educational institutions and leadership developers can help in this respect, not as a competing alternative to practice-based learning at the workplace, but as a supplement. They can do this best by offering learning arenas where leaders can reflect and raise their awareness about their own practices, share experiences with each other, discuss, receive feedback and create new insights which challenge assumptions, mental maps and attitudes.

6. Conclusion

When we know so much about leadership, why do not leaders exercise more effective leadership? The simple answer is that leadership is ineffective because people are imperfect, including leaders themselves. There is certainly something to gain from creating better education and training programmes for leaders, as well as more robust and transparent methods of recruitment and selection of leaders. Moreover, in the future, technological developments will be able to minimise biases and ineffective behaviour by providing leaders with better decision support, more real-time data about organisations and environments, better and more precise methods for selecting upcoming leaders and talents, and more information about leaders themselves and others. However, until this becomes a reality, we must accept the fact that leadership is often ineffective and that in many cases we should settle for 'good enough'. We need to humanise leadership. And this is, perhaps, a better way forward than the present dominating focus on unobtainable ideals involving flawless acts carried out by perfect human beings operating in rational organisational environments. This type of thinking only supports a self-reinforcing leadership industry consisting of actors who have self-interest in inflating the phenomenon of leadership—so they can increase their profits, acquire new consultancy assignments, create better careers for themselves, acquire more citations in academic journals and expand their network. Because many of us strive for the perfect, we love to believe that we are led by the best. To think otherwise is worrying. Therefore, many are clinging to the feel-good understanding of leadership—one that is influenced by normative leadership theories, inspired by exciting Ted talks and by lectures given by leadership gurus; and by the airport literature that provides them with the 'holy grail' of what effective leadership is all about—may be because this is the more comfortable option.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in preparing this chapter.

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