

excerpt from

Real Leadership
Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest
Challenges

by Dean Williams
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Introduction

This is a book for those who are serious about improving the human condition. It is about real leadership—the kind of leadership that helps organizations, communities, and nations face their toughest challenges and have their best shot at success.

Real leadership is lacking in the world today. Much of what passes for leadership, I suggest, is actually counterfeit leadership, even though it might have the appearance of being effective leadership because people are following the leader or buying into his or her agenda. This book defines real leadership and explains why it is desperately needed, and it provides a well-developed model for how to exercise real and responsible leadership for some of the most demanding challenges organizations, communities, and nations face.

Fundamentally, real leadership gets people to confront reality and change values, habits, practices, and priorities in order to deal with the *real threat* or the *real opportunity* the people face. It facilitates improvements in the human condition. Counterfeit leadership, on the other hand, provides false solutions and allows the group to bypass reality.

Certainly, exercising leadership successfully in a complex world is a formidable task. Few people do it well. Their knowledge of how to act in complex, problematic situations is often incomplete and inadequate. They make mistakes, do foolish things, and, at times, misjudge the dynamics of the situation before them, and thereby perpetuate the very problems that they wish they could resolve.

Part of the problem is that many of the popular notions of leadership are inadequate for the challenges we face today. They do not address the complexity and diversity of the problems, threats, and opportunities that groups and institutions must confront if they are to progress. They focus primarily on leading in unsophisticated environments and unduly emphasize the role of the leader in “having convictions,” “articulating a vision,” “showing the way,” and generating “loyal followers.”

Real leadership is not about having strong convictions and imposing them on the group. Nor is it about amassing followers and showing the way forward. Even when the exercise of leadership grows from sincere moral or ethical considerations, that leadership may be wholly irresponsible if its effect is to damage the long-term viability and well-being of

the group or larger system. One can be “right” in regard to the problem and what a group should do but be terribly “wrong” and ineffective in the exercise of leadership. The world is rife with examples of so-called moral leaders acting irresponsibly and of committed, intelligent men and women whose stubborn pursuit of a particular strategy weakens the group or enterprise to which they should be responsible.

Rather than teach people how to be visionaries or motivators, this book addresses the demanding task of mobilizing people to confront their predicament and solve their most pressing problems. The focus is not on getting people to follow but on getting people to face reality and think and act responsibly, thereby enabling their organizations and communities to address their toughest challenges and make meaningful progress.

The subject of real leadership is critical for corporate managers, school superintendents, nonprofit directors, senior government officials, and politicians. Anyone concerned about leadership must distinguish more carefully between those acts of power that create value and prosperity and those that destroy value and thwart prosperity. How people conceive of the use of power has serious repercussions. If people with power do not learn how leadership can advance the well-being of the collective, corporations will continue to be plagued by productivity problems, schools will always be leaving children behind, and the nations of the world will lose much of their accumulated gains in unnecessary wars, chicanery, and blunders.

If those seeking power and authority can learn the strategies and practices of real leadership and operate with greater insight and self-awareness, then they can enhance their chances of success. If leaders can diagnose their challenges with greater clarity, design and execute smarter interventions, and improve their ability to reflect and learn while they are in the midst of action, then they will have a greater hope of generating and sustaining progress.

This book provides a framework for how to exercise real leadership in different contexts. It will help the leader

- analyze the specific nature of the most critical challenge the group or organization faces at a given time (this is the principal challenge that must be attended to if the group is to advance);
- understand the kind of leadership strategies needed to address that challenge;
- recognize how real leadership, as an interactive art, can be manifested in different ways to assist people to face the reality of their predicament, attend to their problems, and be given their best shot at success; and

- appreciate the ways in which power, when used irresponsibly, can wreak havoc on all it touches—therefore the need to be responsible with one’s power and exercise real leadership.

We need people who can provide real leadership in multiple and diverse contexts

When I ask my students who they think were responsible leaders worth emulating—leaders who did something positive—invariably the responses include the names of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Winston Churchill. I point out that even these people, as great as they were, failed basic principles of real leadership in some contexts in which they attempted to exercise their power. For example, Churchill provided brilliant leadership in mobilizing his country in the face of a formidable threat posed by Hitler’s Germany.¹ However, at the end of the war, when he proceeded to do what he had always done, he was not reelected because so few people had confidence in him to provide the economic and developmental leadership needed to rebuild Britain. Earlier in his career, he also had failed miserably as First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I, when he sent thousands of Australian and Allied troops to their deaths at Gallipoli.² For that fiasco, he was fired from the cabinet. While Churchill provides a decidedly mixed model of leadership, his life highlights the incredible difficulty of exercising consistently successful leadership across the sectors and eras of a life.

Sometimes a tough and demanding authority figure finds himself in a set of circumstances where his style brings great leadership acclaim. Indeed, this happened with New York mayor Rudolf Giuliani. As mayor, he was often under attack for his insensitive and domineering approach, irrespective of the fact that it was, at times, very effective. His personal life was the subject of daily ridicule in the newspapers and on talk radio. Nevertheless, following the events of September 11, 2001, Giuliani came to symbolize the aspirations and resolve of New Yorkers and many Americans more generally to move forward with courage. This crisis produced a very different context in which Giuliani’s characteristics and strategies of operating suddenly provided what New Yorkers needed for them to deal with and manage the aftermath of that horrific event.

Unfortunately, too many powerful people have recognized too late that the mode of operating that led to past success was inadequate for the demands of a new and different context. The person who, based on his or her natural tendencies and inclinations, keeps using the same

approach to leadership has a diminished chance of success and will eventually fail. For example, the war hero who becomes president or the social activist who attains formal authority as an elected official rarely performs as well in the new context, because the person cannot see how his or her natural tendencies and inclinations are actually dysfunctional in the different context. They think that leadership is a set of traits or characteristics that are applicable in any setting. I disagree. Different contexts call for different leadership strategies if the people are to productively address the problems they face and open up pathways to progress.

More than ever, we need men and women who can succeed in multiple contexts. Nowhere is this more true than in the field of education. Even straightforward tasks such as teaching children the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic require a broad array of leadership strategies to get the complete system functioning in the service of children. There are more than fourteen thousand school superintendents in the United States, all struggling to address the complex educational challenges of their respective communities. In large urban districts where social and economic problems exacerbate the demands of reform, the average tenure of a superintendent is less than three years. For many of these men and women, the problems are so overwhelming and the politics so vicious that they find it almost impossible to make lasting progress. Given the demands of the job, many school boards throughout the country look for candidates outside the field of education so that they can get a different kind of individual to lead their districts. In recent years, a number of businessmen and military generals have been appointed with the hope that they have this “leadership thing” figured out and can fix the system. These individuals, like their predecessors, struggle bravely to get something meaningful accomplished and generally do no better.

And this point is true for business as well. According to a recent report of CEO turnover at the world’s 2,500 largest publicly traded corporations, most companies are setting higher standards of performance for chief executive officers than ever before, and CEOs are falling short in record numbers.³ The report notes, “This phenomenon is now fully global, even in regions not burdened by governance scandals. CEOs are being replaced at a faster rate in Europe than the United States, and CEO turnover has skyrocketed in Asia, where chief executives of major corporations had been relatively protected from market forces.”⁴

Rakesh Khurana of Harvard Business School has documented how and why boards of directors have become enamored with charismatic,

superstar CEOs who they hope will be a corporate savior and guide the company to the market equivalent of the “promised land.”⁵ Most do a mediocre job, and many fall short. The excessive reliance on their charisma and visionary outlook that may have worked in a past setting is often insufficient to produce real and sustainable progress. Khurana points out that many of these CEOs have an inadequate appreciation of the role of context in determining what the best approach to leadership should be.

*Leadership must be approached
as an interactive art*

To increase the chances of success, real leadership must be approached as an interactive art. It is an art in that it requires creativity and imagination, rather than a singular set of well-honed practices; and it is interactive in that one must be willing to “dance” with the reality of the context so that the best solutions can emerge. It cannot be treated as a hard science with prescriptive approaches such as “Do X and you will produce Y.” On the contrary, as an art, real leadership requires the capacity to improvise, be imaginative, and make ongoing corrections according to the specific challenge the people face, the discoveries of the group as they tackle the challenge, and the shifting dynamics of the context. Therefore, strong diagnostic skills and considerable flexibility in one’s intervention style are essential if one is to lead effectively in multiple contexts on multiple challenges.

Of course, I am not the first to make this observation on the situational demands of leadership. The social psychologist Victor Vroom has written extensively on the subject.⁶ But what is missing from these writings, by Vroom and others, is a way to categorize the specific nature of the challenge the people face and explain what real leadership should look like in different settings. In this book, I present a model to assist in the diagnosis of the context to ascertain the group’s principal challenge. I also put forward a set of leadership principles and intervention strategies to get the people to do the requisite problem-solving work to address that challenge.

For nearly two decades, I have been involved in the teaching and study of leadership and authority around the world, working with men and women in business, government, schools, and community organizations. In recent years, as research for this book, I have interviewed more than a dozen current or former presidents and prime ministers of nations

to gain insight into the leadership challenges they have faced. I have interacted with many educational administrators at the local, state, and national levels to explore the demands of educational reform. I have been an adviser to many executives in corporations, community groups, and governments, as they have undertaken reform initiatives to revitalize their institutions.

I have also had a unique chance to examine power, authority, and social change at the most primal and traditional level—with the nomadic Penan people in the rain forest of Borneo. I have observed the Penan tribe deal with the huge adaptive challenge of cultural survival caused by the creeping forces of modernization and an eroding habitat due to the shady practices of logging companies and the misguided strategies of politicians.

Perhaps my most valuable resource in the study of leadership has been my students at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. They have challenged my thinking and given me an amazing array of personal case studies that have helped me explore and develop the notion of real leadership in different contexts.

Of particular importance in my understanding of leadership has been my relationship with Ronald Heifetz and Riley Sinder. Heifetz was my professor and mentor at Harvard in the mid- to late 1980s when I was a doctoral student. Today I am honored to be his colleague at the Kennedy School, and together we teach and consult on leadership. Sinder is also a valued colleague, and, over the past few years, we have spent many an hour in rich and imaginative discussion about the challenges of leading in diverse settings. His contribution and support have enriched my knowledge and helped, in no small way, to shape the ideas in this book.

Heifetz and Sinder distinguished (1) leadership from authority and (2) technical challenges from adaptive challenges.⁷ This book is primarily about exercising leadership with authority, although at various points I discuss the demands of leading when one has little or no authority. But I am mostly referring to people in authority positions who have a special opportunity to exercise real leadership—an opportunity that is often neglected or squandered. The book is about helping leaders sense what those opportunities might be.

The opportunities of real leadership are primarily in addressing demanding adaptive challenges. A *technical* challenge requires the straightforward application of expertise to solve the problem, whereas an *adaptive* challenge is more complex in that it necessitates changing people's values, habits, practices, and priorities. Leadership for an adaptive

challenge requires orchestrating a process of getting the various factions and entities who own a piece of the problem to do *adaptive work*. In the following chapters, I present my discoveries about real leadership and adaptive work. I give examples of people who tried to lead and failed, while illustrating where they went wrong. I also write about individuals who *were* able to treat leadership as an interactive art and understood the notion of doing adaptive work, and thereby succeeded in helping people face their most crucial challenges and advance.

In Part I, I describe the concept of real leadership—its features and characteristics—and distinguish it from counterfeit leadership. *Counterfeit leadership* is a set of actions and strategies used by an authority figure that thwarts progress, whereas *real leadership* is a set of actions and strategies that facilitates progress. The first step in exercising real leadership is to diagnose correctly the principal challenge the group *really* faces—be it an organization, a school system, a community, or a nation. I describe six distinct adaptive challenges that can befall a group and threaten the health and survival of the system. Each challenge requires a specific leadership approach.

Part II addresses the six domains of adaptive challenge and provides an intervention framework for how to lead effectively and responsibly in these different but extremely critical problem contexts. The six domains are: an activist challenge, a development challenge, a transition challenge, a maintenance challenge, a creative challenge, and a crisis challenge. Each chapter in Part II presents cases and examples that illustrate leadership successes and leadership failures for these six respective challenges. I also provide practical tools and specific strategies for helping committed men and woman use their power to exercise real leadership and get the people to address the principal challenge and varied tasks needed to produce genuine and sustainable progress for their enterprise or community.

In Part III, I look at real leadership in the context of multiple challenges. Using the case of Lawrence of Arabia, I address the question, How does one transition between challenges, modify one's role and provide context-appropriate leadership—and succeed? Leadership for multiple challenges requires enormous flexibility, creativity, and sensitivity. In this section I also consider the personal work of being a real leader and discuss what it means to take responsibility for oneself as an instrument of power. All leaders have personal preferences, idiosyncrasies, and natural predilections. Such stylistic predispositions can either help or hinder the adaptive work of progress. Learning how to discover the effect one's interventions have on others in their problem-solving endeavors

and make adjustments according to situational needs, is essential if one is to successfully lead in diverse contexts.

We desperately need women and men who can provide real leadership for the full array of problematic challenges we face in this complex and interdependent world. “What is real leadership, and how does one employ power to exercise it?” are crucial and central questions for the operation of business, government, and the full array of our civic and social institutions. I believe that real leadership can make the difference between success and failure in all aspects of human activity—between developed states and failed states; between great schools and poor schools; between mediocre companies and extraordinary companies; even between war and peace. And that is why the study of real leadership—the kind of leadership that gets people to face reality, be responsible for their predicament, and deal with their toughest challenges—is of paramount concern.

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