

Can philosophy teach us anything about leadership and management?

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Philosophy can teach us much about leadership and management, but you would not guess it from the two recent books by Robert Spillane and Jean-Etienne Joullié, *Philosophy of Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *The Philosophical Foundations of Management Thought* (Lexington). The premise of each is this: the roots of our thinking about leadership and management reach deep into ancient times, and we can lead and manage better if those roots are exposed. Alas, they never explain the difference between leadership and management, leaving us to wonder why we have two books rather than one. And, by the end, we wonder why we have even one.

The authors are contemptuous of leaders and managers. Leaders, they darkly complain, have a “consistent history of mystical propaganda, widespread corruption, arrogant stupidity, and mass homicide;” and managers, for their part, “have bad tempers, do not like their colleagues, and do not care about their anxieties or aspirations.” They preach that both can receive salvation only by baptism in philosophy.

I am not a convert, but I do find an opportunity here to reflect upon how to do better what they do so poorly, namely:

- How to think about leadership.
- How to think about management education.
- How to apply the history of philosophy to leadership and management.

First, how shall we think about leadership? Their leadership book yields, with much patience, a sort of analysis of leadership. They say that a leader must have two things: specialised knowledge and rhetorical skill. These two things can influence some people to give *authority* to — to *authorise* — the leader. People do this to achieve two goals: to grow the specialised knowledge, and to use it in a way that benefits the group. Given that so little of *The Philosophy of Leadership* is devoted to the philosophy of leadership, that is all there is to say.

The authors are right to prioritise social authorisation as a source of formal leadership. But they leave vast gaps, including these:

- They baldly claim that there can be *no leadership without authority*. But there are widely discussed cases of leadership — which Ronald Heifetz aptly designates “leading without authority” — in which an emergent leader, who has no acknowledged leadership rights or responsibilities, plays a major group role. This is an important category, one that can result in the eventual authorisation of the leader.
- The authors underestimate the *importance of group goals* for leadership. They only allow for knowledge-related goals. But a group can have any number of different goals — from safety, to wealth creation, to public service, to fun. Knowledge is always of *pragmatic* value, but it is seldom the primary goal, except in educational and research organisations. In most cases, knowledge is strictly an instrument for advancing the chief goal.
- Their account misses the most important aspect of leadership. Followers are not looking for someone upon whom they can bestow authority; they are looking for *someone who will take on responsibility* — in particular, the responsibility for envisioning and advancing the group goal. It so happens that it is *also* a good idea for them to give authority to the leader, but only because it is hard to carry out responsibilities without rights. Conceptually, the rights flow from the responsibilities. This crucially fixes, as the basic principle for good leadership, this: *focus first on carrying out your responsibility, not on amassing and wielding your authority*.

Second, how shall we think about management education? In the management book, the authors often adopt a prophetic tone, calling down fire and brimstone upon the purveyors of modern management education. It is a calamitous mistake, they say, to believe that management is a science requiring the mastery of a special body of knowledge. This folly can be traced back to Plato, whose Academy was the first management school—a school that promoted “ideas that are morally and intellectually corrupt” and that trained “self-righteous autocrats.” They proceed to denounce everyone from Descartes (who has, regrettably, given us Taylorism and Michael Porter) to the British Empiricists (who, sadly, laid the groundwork for positivism and scientism).

In one of this book’s startling incongruities, they prescribe as the remedy for these philosophy-induced ills... philosophy! Replace the management curriculum with general education in philosophy, and all will be well. And how has that worked out so far?

Another stunning incongruity is produced by their denunciation of the idea that management requires mastery of a specialised body of knowledge. Recall that leadership—which they hint is the real aim of all management—has been defined in their leadership book by the *leader’s possession of specialised knowledge*. The authors never try to reconcile the conflict, nor even seem to notice it.

There are less oracular, and more salutary, ways to think about the future of management education. Any professional practice, including law, education, medicine, social work, and management, culls relevant basic knowledge from the general disciplines and applies it to life. In each case, we know that a good professional education has three elements:

- A solid foundation in general skills and knowledge, including philosophy (often established as an undergraduate).
- A solid foundation in the real life professional practice (often established as an intern).
- A bridge that connects them.

Each professional discipline has developed a set of principles that helps students cross the bridge. It is an evolving set of principles, and benefits from informed and reflective criticism. Unfortunately, I do not find anything informed or reflective in the philippics of these authors.

Third, how shall we learn about leadership and management from the history of philosophy? Intellectual

history, the main project of both books, can be gripping and edifying—but only if it adheres to a few rules, all of which are flouted by these authors:

Be clear about the topic itself. Management is never defined, leadership receives only a vague and inadequate analysis, the two are never distinguished, and where we can infer some sort of distinction (as with the role of specialised knowledge) it is not credible.

Adopt clear principles for the selection of historical thinkers. No principle of selection is evident. Each book provides a quirky selection of white male European thinkers. For no apparent reason, some philosophers are covered extensively in one of the books but ignored in the other. Three philosophical giants who *never* make the cut are Mill, Wittgenstein, and Rawls. Yet, one who merits coverage in both books is General George Patton! The best example of their slipshod structure is the chapter on ancient Cynicism. All indications are that it was written for the longer management book but transplanted without editing to the leadership book to balance the two lengths; it only discusses management, never leadership, the term “leadership” occurring only in the chapter title.

Show respect for the thinkers selected. Too often, the authors inject abrupt and sometimes mocking dismissals of their subject’s so-called errors, confusions, or lies, in a style best described as overweening woolliness. The leadership book, to cite only one example, limits Plato to a page and a half; his rich and important notion of philosopher-kings is briskly banished on the grounds that “they must tell lies.”

Focus on the aspects of their work that are relevant. The authors have produced a series of loosely related idiosyncratic encyclopaedia articles, with no argumentative arc nor much assistance for the reader in sifting among the essential and the accidental. There is page after page of ponderous prose about thinkers and views that can only be connected to that book’s topic by the slenderest of threads. And the stew is seasoned heavily with trivia. I do not know why we need a description of the Brazilian national flag, a plot summary of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or reference to the adulteries of Marcus Aurelius’s wife. Everything is ultimately connected to everything, of course; but most of us would prefer to read everything on our own time.

“This reminds me of that” does not count as relevance. Yet this is the link the authors like best. They connect Peter Drucker to Achilles, for example, not because Drucker’s ideas were inspired by Homer, but because they both focus on getting the job done instead of the inner life. But elsewhere they connect Drucker to the existentialists, who are famous for *prioritising* the inner life. Similarly, Taylorism is blamed on positivism in one book, but in the other is blamed on Descartes, whose rationalism is *antithetical* to positivism. Any river of ideas can have multiple tributaries; but noting that a river and a higher stream both contain water does not prove that the one feeds the other. Superficial resemblances are best explored when a project is being brainstormed and researched. The reader should not be asked to take it from there.

In the introduction to the leadership volume, the authors write, “We have written this book to arouse philosophical curiosity, not to satisfy it.” In both books, they abundantly achieve the second part of that goal, but not the first.

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Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author’s paper [Leadership, Management, and the History of Ideas](#), in the journal *Philosophy of Management* (March 2017), in which he reviews two books by Robert Spillane and Jean-Etienne Joullié: *Philosophy of Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *The Philosophical Foundations of Management Thought* (Lexington).
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