

(Mis)leading ethics: towards a bearable lightness of being



Leadership ethics are a sacred phenomenon. We are here to preach heresy. But not too much! For who would listen? Our argument in a [recent paper](#) is that there is a romanticism that underlies established leadership ethics that is as destructive as it is seductive, as responsible for unnecessary dissonance as it is for building resonance.

A degree of utopianism is an inevitable, productive and healthy phenomenon in organisational life. Where would we be if we did not strive for and have some hope in creating a more just, reasonable and sustainable world? But we also need to be aware of the limitations and entrapments of our romantic assumptions and aspirations. In contrast to simple-minded idealism, we argue for the value of what we term *ethical irony*. Ethical leadership, we contend, involves a lightness of being, a lightness of thought, heart and touch in how we handle the inevitable tensions and contradictions of a diverse and cosmopolitan world of organised work.

The romance of leadership and its limitations

'With every uniform, they issue a skin.'

Erving Goffman

'..... and three inches of flesh!'

Arlie Hochschild

'It is like talking to deadwood, driftwood – even balsa wood with 90 per cent floating out of the water and only 10 per cent involvement and contribution. They act holier than thou, but they are up to their elbows in the cream cake, saying easy on the teaspoon.'

Joe, Manager, International Steel Company

The dominant romance of leadership is one of individual heroism – a traditionally masculine model that posits the leader as a 'great man' who is single-handedly able to do achieve that which no one else can achieve. This also involves organisational leaders being portrayed, and portraying themselves, as acting on a higher and superior ethical and human plane. Stereotypes abound. The struggles of leaders and their success in overcoming all odds is equated with the achievements of superstars, celebrated military commanders, elite sporting champions and even saints. This romance is a celebration of self-expression, individual achievement and personal glory.

An alternative, although less common, romance of leadership is one of collective contribution. Organisational leadership is celebrated as a matter of enablement, facilitation and support, an exercise in collective community building and achievement. Traditional romantic acclaims for community expression and realisation translate into well-established organic images of organisational development. They find contemporary expression in support for a relational leadership that is humble and empowering, forging relationships based on openness, honesty, trust, compassion, reciprocity and collaboration. This romance is one of collective expression, collaborative achievement and communal celebration.

Despite their appeal, simple-minded commitments to such notions flounder on the embedded hierarchies and cosmopolitan diversity of our modern society of organisations. Organisations are beset by systematic inequality, domination and declining trust and loyalty. In such a context, the unrealistic idealism of romantic leadership can appear superficial and hypocritical. As we have argued elsewhere ([Rhodes, 2012](#)), these conditions challenge any assumption that ethics is something that can be realised so that it is over and done with. In our view, ethics-in-practice are better seen as an ongoing challenge, pursuing ethical ideals in full awareness that they will never be fully achieved.

While a relational leadership ethics might promise dialogue, reciprocity and unqualified generosity, its practice is never so straightforward as real leaders are always faced with contradictory ideals and multiple competing agendas and demands. This can impose an intolerable, and even tragic, burden on its unwitting victims. Tragically, the outcome of exaggerated romanticism may be the very lack of authenticity and pessimistic fatalism it seeks to combat. The point we have made in our work is that in facing the lived contradictions and difficulties of ethical leadership, a substantial dose of humble and comic irony may be a recipe for a more meaningful and practical ethics.

An ironic gaze

The ironic perspective on leadership ethics that we have developed involves a lightness of thought in being able to both *look at* as well as *look through* the perspectives we adopt and the prejudices we adhere to. In an article on leadership transformation on leadership co-authored by one of us ([Fuda and Badham, 2011](#)), one of the CEOs in the study, when faced by brutal feedback on his previously autocratic leadership style, jokingly (and humbly) describes his Microsoft VP wife's response like this:

*'You can be a bit of a d***head!*

Mike, CEO, Multinational IT Sourcer

Such sensitivity to fallibility and folly, in the actions of oneself as well as others, is arguably a key capability of those able to operate effectively and elegantly in diverse, cosmopolitan and uncertain environments.

An ironic mask

'A very courageous decision, Minister!'

Jim, Chief Secretary, Government Department

In the face of contestation, contradiction and uncertain and often unfortunate turns of events, leaders are called on to craft out an ethical stance. An ironic performance communicates a recognition and appreciation of such conditions in displays of lightness of thought and heart. Simple ironic performances have been condemned as a safety valve or a ridiculing put-down, a weapon of the weak or a smirk or a sneer. However, a humble and comic irony can play a different role, promoting mutual appreciation and overcoming of differences between actors and audiences, providing relief and fostering creativity in the face of embedded conflicts and paradoxical states of affairs. It also provides some safety in questioning dominant meanings, and pricking pride and arrogance. At the same time, irony's critical edge requires careful handling.

Another senior leader from the same leadership transformation study laughingly recounted the following story. He had been called on to advise a senior government minister on a policy that the minister was promoting. He had responded, 'I think it would be a very courageous decision, Minister.' The Minister, unaware of the [Yes Minister](#) slogan, had replied 'That is correct. I am a very courageous person'.

When the policy collapsed, and the Minister was called to explain to the Prime Minister, the PM laughed when the Minister recounted the incident. It was a career damaging move for the Department Secretary! An ironic performance can have many benefits, yet it is no simple solution for establishing effective communication and relationships. It remains a risky enterprise in the face of diverse responses towards its appropriateness.

An ironic temper

*You must be out of your b***** mind!*

Irate Supplier

Most days!

Senior Manager, Hotel Chain

The ability to retain and apply an ironic perspective and performance is no simple task. It requires a subtle approach that allows a responsive rather than reflex response to challenging situations and events. This is a capability identified in studies from around the world on the mindful even-temperedness of managers and leaders variously described as tempered radicals, creative resisters, insider-outsiders, principled infidels and engaged ironists. In the heat, passion and torment of operating in uncertain, stressful and contested terrains, an ability to appreciate a degree of comedy and absurdity in the human endeavor is a favourable predilection or trait.

In conclusion....

Views of leadership, and the ethics espoused and urgently pursued, are frequently embedded within epic quests or romantic endeavours that place the leader above the fray and superior to lesser mortals and turns of events. Comic and ironic views of leadership take the opposite point of view, whereby the leader is often the unwitting victim of circumstances beyond her understanding or control. A strong dose of this form of irony is a valuable ingredient in any leadership ethic. It provides an important counter, albeit not self-standing alternative, to the romantic ethics and mythologies that inspire yet also mislead us.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Ethical Irony and the Relational Leader](#), *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 2018.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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