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Editorial Transitions – Hail and Farewell

Dennis Tourish

This issue of *Leadership* coincides with ‘regime’ change. After eight years in the job, I am stepping down, and the role of editor will be taken up jointly by Doris Scheditzki and Gareth Edwards. I know that they will do an excellent job and wish them well. But I hope that I will be excused for taking the opportunity to offer some thanks, and reflect more widely on what this journal means and the contribution it has made to leadership studies.

I remain indebted to our founding editors – David Collinson and Keith Grint – for having the vision and determination to establish the journal, way back in 2005. Additionally, I am grateful to our wonderful team of Associate Editors. This has included Gareth and Doris, plus Michelle Bligh, Richard Bolden, Brigid Carroll, Jackie Ford, Brad Jackson, Owain Smolović Jones, Leah Tomkins and Suze Wilson. They have provided a sterling service, editing papers, offering much needed advice and contributing their own work. I am also grateful to our invaluable editorial board, not least for their numerous reviews of submissions. This role is frequently unheralded, not least by the Universities that employ us, but without it journals would not be able to exist. Thanks are also due to all those authors who have submitted papers to us. Lastly, I must acknowledge the invaluable assistance received from Aina Blanch, publishing editor for the journal at Sage, and the numerous dedicated production staff who work for it in India, particularly Neha Gambhir and Jayapriya Balasubramani. All have been incredibly supportive and efficient.

In launching this journal, David and Keith recognised that there was a need for a critical outlet on leadership – that is, one willing to publish papers that pose awkward questions and critique mainstream scholarship. Many years on, this need is still striking. For the most part, our field remains relentlessly positive in its theoretical framing, positivist in its preferred methodological approach and positive in its statistical findings. Bad leadership – evident in
Enron, Lehman Brothers, RBS, Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Theranos – is sometimes depicted as not leadership at all. The most influential theoretical models in the field legitimise the concentration of too much power in too few hands. They also continue to produce laundry lists of desirable qualities that they insist leaders should possess. Effective leaders, it seems, must perform miracles thrice daily, walk on water before nightfall, and then turn it into wine (to be sold off in order to further enhance shareholder value), all the while remaining humble servants of the people. Impossiblism is rife. In my view, authentic leadership theory (ALT) is one such approach (see relevant chapter on ALT in Tourish, 2019). It is fitting that ALT has been extensively debated in this journal (see, for example, a Special Issue published in August 2021), a debate that is continued in a spirited exchange between proponents and opponents in this issue.

None of this is to suggest that leadership is unimportant. Who becomes President of the US matters, Putin’s Presidency has made a material difference to the world, and individual business leaders have the power to fundamentally affect the lives of millions of people, for good or ill. When Liz Truss became Prime Minister of the UK in September 2022 few could have imagined that she would so quickly show just how much leadership can matter - unfortunately, in this case, for the worse. But a leader’s power is embedded in dense social and material networks. But a leader’s power is embedded in dense social and material networks. Its potency depends on the interaction of a multitude of factors that are only ever partly under the control of any individual. As Karl Marx (1852) famously put it, and he wasn’t always wrong: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.’
These issues go beyond the narrow confines of academic discourse. Harvard Business Review’s now discontinued annual profile of ‘the best performing CEOs in the world’ assumed that business outcomes could be determined exclusively by the actions of CEOs. It ran from 2014 to 2019, and HBR’s editor reported that the resulting list ‘was routinely one of the year’s most-read articles on HBR.org’ (Ignatius, 2020: 12). This shows how far the exaggeration of leader agency has penetrated the business media and our wider society. Critical scholarship still has much to do, in challenging both the theory and practice of leadership.

Looking back, three main ambitions have driven my role as editor. The first has been to maintain Leadership’s commitment to criticality. An editorial published in 2015 explained this approach as follows: ‘It was never the intention to create a ghetto of critical leadership literature. But we do insist that the critical literature is at least engaged with, even if it is ultimately discounted. Despite this, we routinely receive papers that approach established leadership theories with undue reverence and ignore the criticisms offered of them – much of which has appeared in this journal. Such papers are desk rejected. Note: they are not rejected because they accept dominant theories. They are rejected because they do not engage with the critical literature on the subject’ (p.138). Remarkably, about 90% of submissions are still rejected for this reason. It suggests that many submitting authors do not read the guidelines published on our website. This is self-sabotage, like a captain who refuses to consult navigation charts, all the better to sink his or her own ship. There are outlets for such papers. Leadership is not one of them.

Secondly, I have tried to encourage papers that address really important issues in our world, such as climate change (Case et al, 2015), the war in Ukraine (Grint, 2022; Sanders, 2022), racism (e.g. Ladkin, 2022 – see also a special issue on racism and leadership, in February 2021), the COVID pandemic (e.g. Wilson, 2020), the destructive rise and role of Donald Trump (Chace, 2021) and much more. Leadership studies, and management studies in general come
to that, has been slow on the uptake on all these matters (see also Harley and Fleming, 2021). Why?

In my increasingly jaundiced view, part of the answer is that publishing has become an end in itself for too many of us, rather than a means of saying something important. Performative pressures create an incentive to publish even when we have nothing significant to say. In consequence, many scholars produce a diet of trivia, couched in obscure prose, and avert their gaze from the critical problems that face the globe. Like an architect who specialises only in miniatures, they obsess over ever tinier gaps in the literature in the hope that it will lead more quickly to publication. Even if successful, this is a recipe for a boring and often repetitive career. Without being too grand about our job, it surely means that we are neglecting our duty as academics. This includes an obligation to do meaningful work. We are also abusing those freedoms that we still possess as a profession. Our scholarship should matter, but this will only happen if we make it so. I hope that *Leadership* matters.

Thirdly, I believe that the social world in which we live is too complex to be explained by only one methodological approach and one style of writing. Most published papers are written to what has become a very jaded formula – abstract, introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion. This suits many papers, but it doesn’t suit them all. The result is drab uniformity. No wonder that we generally read our journals in the same way that most people seem to eat brown rice, in misery, but hoping that it will be good for us. We need to open up how we theorise and how we write (see Cunliffe, 2022, for some typically provocative thinking on these issues). In this spirit, we have published many papers that use innovative formats, including a recent stimulating discussion of how renowned philosophers might approach a leadership development programme, written in the format of a three-act play (Wilson et al, 2022). We need more work like this – and different from it.
Leadership has always been a welcoming space for those who challenge the conventional wisdom of our field, and I have no doubt that this will remain true in the future. Editing it has been one of the greatest privileges and pleasures of my career. I will remain a dedicated reader, reviewer and, I hope, contributor, and look forward to its continued success in the years to come.
References


