THE MYSTERIES OF LEADERSHIP

Leader. The ancient Egyptians had a word for it: seshmi. They also had a word for followers: shemsu. And, remarkably, they had a word for leadership: seshem-t.

Over the millennia, we have heard far more about leaders than followers, and more about followers than leadership. Chroniclers, priests, and poets have told stories of God-anointed leaders like Moses and Muhammad, of adventuring warrior-kings like Gilgamesh and Odysseus, of great founders like Alexander the Great, Shi Huangdi, and George Washington.

The ancient Greeks raised the right questions. In Plato's Republic, Socrates thought that "there might be a reform of the State if only one change was made, which is not a slight or easy one." What was that? he was asked. When "philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one." Aristotle, too, appeared to be talking about leadership when he wrote: "Since every political society is composed of rulers and subjects let us consider whether the relations of one to the other should interchange or be permanent. For the education of the citizens will necessarily vary with the answer given to this question."

From Hesiod, who wrote of the rise and fall of a race of heroes in the eighth century B.C.E., through the writings of Polybius, Plutarch, Augustine,
Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, and a host of other celebrated thinkers, philosophers and theologians and politicians, with some striking exceptions, wrote less about change itself than about cycles and laws of history or the fickleness of fate. Certainly they never referred explicitly to what today we call leadership, but they wrote of popes and potentates, rulers and rebels, heroes and infidels in penetrating ways that some day would help us frame theories of change through leadership.

CLEOPATRA'S NOSE

The most commonly recognized “leadership” qualities in the ancient world were passed down in folk sagas and biblical stories. Men were admired for their physical strength and their fighting prowess, women for their beauty. Many centuries later men were still equating women’s importance with their sex appeal. To Pascal in his *Pensées*, history had turned on “Cleopatra’s nose: had it been shorter, the whole aspect of the world would have been altered.”

But physical appeal was not Cleopatra’s trump card. “For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her,” Plutarch reported, “or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible.” Yet Cleopatra’s charisma was in the service of her greater strengths of rulership—her intelligence, militancy, ambition—and all these qualities were harnessed in a steadfast pursuit of her supreme goal: the empowerment of her throne and empire.

Through the millennia philosophers and practical thinkers posed questions that have puzzled us to this day. Is there any meaning in the flow of history or is it just a jumble of chaotic events? Could humankind ever control the course of events or even understand it? Can laws of historical causation be drawn from the story of humanity? Can humans plan change or must they simply react to it?

If the great thinkers made no final breakthroughs on such questions, at least they posed them with clarity and panache. Still, by the start of the twentieth century—an era that would desperately need answers to some of these questions—many issues remained in vexing obscurity. More and more the search for solutions fell to the great universities that came into their own with the turn of the century. This meant that they were claimed
by disciplines—history, politics, sociology, philosophy, and the rest—that had fenced off their various feudal tufts.

In my own corner of academe I typified this problem. Teaching political science at a small college, Williams, in Massachusetts, I loved analyzing the ideas and talents of the great constitution makers of the world, but I felt unable to penetrate to the moral and psychological forces that drove these leaders. To an honors class in leadership I posed lofty questions of historical causation, but I was better at raising problems than analyzing the swirl of forces that powered the transformation of cultures. Some of our most engaging classes dealt with life stories of great men and women, but I rarely felt satisfied that we had gotten to the heart of the interplay of environmental and personal forces that shaped the actions of leaders and rulers.

Something was lacking in my own intellectual background, I realized, and I began to see what it was: psychology. I had read books that used psychological concepts to explain crucial aspects of human behavior. But I lacked a disciplinary foundation. What to do? I had heard that Al Goethals in Williams's psychology department was interested in leadership. Soon I was sitting in his office and hearing of work in his field, including that of a psychologist named Abraham Maslow, who had developed a striking theory of human wants and needs that held fascinating potential for understanding leadership and change.

I have come to see leadership not only as a field of study but as a master discipline that illuminates some of the toughest problems of human needs and social change, and in the process exploits the findings of political science, history, sociology, philosophy, theology, literature, and psychology. I have come to see, too, the contributions that the study of leadership can make to those disciplines.

The extraordinary aspect of the Egyptian distinction between leader and leadership lies in its helping us to frame theories of change through leadership. Some writers contend that we can learn about leadership only by relating the “life and times” of individual leaders, especially the heroic ones. Others argue that we must construct a general theory of leadership in order that we grasp the role of individual leaders and their traits. I hope to prove in this book that both approaches are necessary and that we can do both.

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From the days of Homer, the simplest way of understanding leaders and rulers was to examine their distinguishing characteristics. It is the same today. When a Russian president takes office or a European premier loses her parliamentary majority or an Asian dictator seizes power or an American presidential candidate wins his party's nomination, our first questions tend to be about their reported traits. What does he look like? Is he a good orator? Is he gay or Catholic or elderly or childless? Is she tough, compassionate, experienced, moralistic? If these are the kinds of questions that you consider most crucial, you are taking a "traits" approach to leadership. If instead you emphasize the political environment the leader faces, the economic or ideological context, the attitudes and expectations of followers, then you probably are a "situationist."

You may be a traits analyst without knowing it. When you apply for a job you expect to answer questions about your background, experience, and skills while being evaluated for such intangibles as dependability, empathy, initiative, fortitude, ambition, and the like—traits you assume relate to the tasks you would be taking on. This seems just a matter of common sense. Why should an employer not want someone with such traits? Uncommon sense suggests that some of these qualities may be irrelevant to what you will be doing, but a good deal of quantitative research backs up the usefulness of this kind of traits approach in predicting performance at school or work.

How does traits research help us to understand the sources of leadership? Much of the work on traits was done by analysts ferreting out qualities that undergird leadership skills. "The leader is characterized," leadership scholar Bernard Bass, for example, concluded, "by a strong drive for responsibility and completion of tasks, vigor and persistence in the pursuit of goals, venturesomeness and originality in problem solving," self-confidence, willingness to accept consequences, tolerance for stress, frustration, and delay.

These traits are heavily management-oriented because they were drawn mainly from extensive studies of corporations. A comparable study of political leadership might be less comprehensive, more guarded and nuanced, and subject to greater cultural differences.

The long and restless research for common traits of leadership rises from the most basic of explanations of change in history: the dynamic, decisive
role of the "Great Man" who bends history's course to his own will. Humans have a свойства, needed heroes to deify or destroy as all-powerful causes for success or as scapegoats for failure. Children are brought up on tales of warriors, outlaws, martyrs. Bookstores are filled with glossy accounts of corporate titans, military geniuses, political giants. A century and a half ago, Thomas Carlyle had boldly proclaimed on behalf of heroes that "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here."

The American philosopher Sidney Hook distinguished between the "eventful" man who happened to be involved in an historic situation but without really determining its course, and the "event-making" man whose "actions influenced subsequent developments along a quite different course than would have been followed if these actions had not been taken," actions that were "the consequences of outstanding capacities of intelligence, will, and character rather than accidents of position." Hook's distinction, as he noted, recognized the general belief that a hero is great not only because of what he does but because of what he is—because of his traits.

Just as Great Men often stumble, so did the Great Man theory. The noble achievements of history's heroes were often shown to be morally flawed, or in fact the product of myriad others who shared little of the glory, or simply the result of accidents or miscalculations or "contingency." Napoleon, who won heroic status and a library of adulatory biographies after a career of brilliant victories, lost much of his luster after Waterloo, though visitors still flock to his tomb in Paris. Adolf Hitler, with his "heroic" posturings and boasts to the German people that he would establish the Greater Reich for a thousand years, brought his country to utter ruin in little more than a decade.

SLAVES OF HISTORY

It is comforting to take the Great Man approach when we reflect on our own "life and times." We can remember the good decisions we made, choosing one college or career over another, moving to the best place to live, finding the right person as our spouse. We may see those choices as our own, drawn from needs and hopes in turn drawn from years of thought and growth. If in our youth we were controlled by family and peer and
school pressures, we may feel that increasingly we were able to take our lives into our own hands.

Is it so simple as that? Each of us is born in a certain place, of certain parents, in a certain neighborhood, into a particular social class, religion, belief system. Whatever choices we had fell within a relatively narrow frame. Experience may have stunted our life-chances and alternatives rather than broadened them. And if we enjoyed a sense of freedom or even self-esteem in having decided to be, say, a leader, an activist, a change maker, in school or workplace or community, how much latitude did we actually have?

To respond to situations seems as inevitable as making use of one's traits. But a theory of "situationism" is no less elusive. We exist in multiple situations—which ones are more important? Can one situation, such as living in an affluent family, override another, such as belonging to a discriminated-against race? Can dire poverty overcome high intelligence, or vice versa? We may be able to change a particular situation, such as a job, more readily than we can change a particular trait, such as sociability, but in changing jobs are we not still controlled by broader environmental factors?

If these are unsettling questions in our private lives, imagine how complex and urgent they can be in society as a whole, and how potent in their implications for leadership. Vast numbers of people exist in common circumstances of geography, race, religion, class, illiteracy, ill health, ignorance. Dire conditions create dire wants that in turn create opportunities for political leaders to mobilize those in need for the cause of transformational change—or, alternatively, to exploit them.

The potential for real, intended change that addresses the deepest human needs turns crucially on the extent to which humans are able to separate themselves from their confining social roots and growth experiences and thus manage to control their destinies, to act creatively in pursuit of real change. How far can we free ourselves from becoming pawns of situations and "slaves of history"? How far are we able to act as free agents in pursuing liberty, opportunity, happiness, for ourselves and for others?

Few in all of history have done more both to clarify and to confuse these issues than Karl Marx. Both a philosopher of change and a revolutionary strategist and activist, Marx dramatically embodied, on a grand scale, the age-old debate over the roles of individuals and situations.
Marx's intellectual "situation" was marked by myriad efforts to discern the laws governing the development of societies. His predecessor Hegel had contended that "great men" had "no consciousness of the general Idea they were unfolding," but enacted "the will of the World-Spirit." Hegel called such men the "clear-sighted ones" but, though they embodied the "Truth for their age," they had but a dim insight into it. The difference was that those who followed and obeyed them had none. The great were one-eyed men in a land of the blind.

The young Marx turned Hegel's idealism on its head. While agreeing that history was driven by impersonal forces, Marx insisted that these were not spiritual but material, grounded in human needs.

Marx pushed situationism to its most extreme form. Humankind moved through repeated and determined stages of class formation, class deprivation, class struggle. No need to search for leaders because the dialectical process of class struggle was ineluctable, invulnerable to conscious human shaping. No need to look for fancy theories of causation in history; to Marx, epochal changes lay in the unfulfilled needs of the masses.

Given Marx's belief in the dialectic of class struggle, it was both ironic and appropriate that another brilliant thinker would arise to oppose his revolutionary teachings with a different idea of struggle. This was the British social philosopher Herbert Spencer. Living in the age of Darwin, Spencer applied the exciting new ideas of evolution to the marketplace. The Great Man, he contended, was the result only of a "long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown." Social change was the product of economic struggle, with evolution invariably favoring the most fit. Unlike Marx, who saw tooth-and-claw capitalism as merely the prerequisite for the revolutionary birth of communism, Spencer celebrated capitalist society as a highly evolved "social organism" where "fitness" was proven by accumulations of wealth and power. He showed how the ruthless application of nature's law not only controlled economic development but militated against any intervention by the state—or by rulers wishing to use government to interfere with the automatic workings of the marketplace, say, to relieve the miseries of the "undeserving poor."

The most eloquent—and most savage—rebuttal to determinists on the left and the right came not from another philosopher but from a writer who had long pondered the question of historical causation, Leo Tolstoy.
But while he rejected as frauds all theories that claimed to disclose history’s inner mechanics, Tolstoy poured equal scorn on the pretensions of Great Men. Free will was no less a delusion than simple determinism. In his masterpiece, *War and Peace*, after noting that “millions of Christian men killed and tortured each other” in Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, Tolstoy asked what were the causes of this extraordinary occurrence. Not Napoleon’s ambition, he replied, nor Tsar Alexander’s tenacious resistance, nor any other single thing, but rather “an incalculable number of causes present themselves. The deeper we delve in search of these causes the more of them we find; and each separate cause or whole series of causes appears to us equally valid in itself and equally false by its insignificance compared to the magnitude of the events.”

In some ways, Tolstoy’s idea of history as an inexhaustible universe of minute causes was an admission of intellectual despair over the dilemma of the human role in causation. He recognized the explanatory attractiveness of “scientific” determinism and also of human free will, but he could not justify faith in either. Instead he sought to accommodate both: men *felt* that they were acting freely—making history—because the causes that in fact determined their actions were infinitesimal and infinite, forever beyond their comprehension.

Of one thing, however, Tolstoy was certain: none of us, no general, no leader, could control events. Indeed, even the greatest king was only “history’s slave.”

**WHAT LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS CAN DO**

All of us, in our own way, are theorists of causation. We try to figure out why certain things happen and other things don’t—and then generalize about them. We wonder whether our “situations” in life unduly control us, whether we can break free of them if we wish to, whether we can gain control of our lives. Perhaps we ask ourselves whether or not our traits—our initiative, creativity, self-esteem—can free us from situations we abhor.

What you and I might consider a passing reflection or occasional puzzlement was for Karl Marx a momentous intellectual and political problem that echoed Tolstoy’s. Throughout his life Marx stuck to his deterministic theory of historical materialism. But he also had to recognize the central role of activist human beings in forging their own history. After
all, as early as 1848, Marx, not yet thirty years old, and Friedrich Engels, twenty-seven, issued a momentous and ringing call to arms, concluding, "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!"

Evidently this Marx was not waiting for history's inexorable logic of change; rather he would seize history by the collar and give it a shove. Historian Alan Swingewood has pointed to the contradiction between Marx's humanist conception that "change evolves through the collective, democratic actions of ordinary individuals seeking to develop their own social, political and cultural institutions" and his description of the social and economic order as "a systemic structure of collectivist and historically necessary forces." Marx remained equivocal. "Men make their own history," he wrote in 1859, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."

In the century and a half since Marx, no theorist, no practicing revolutionary, has eclipsed him in grasping the fundamental social and historical forces underlying change and causation in history. Even radicals and conservatives who have no use for Marx's political agenda grant that he remains the towering figure in the reach and depth of his analysis of social processes. Yet no one has solved the fundamental problem that Marx developed so well but did not resolve. Scholars have brilliantly defined the questions but, isolated in their own disciplines, they have failed to distinguish conclusively the roles played in social change by individual and situation, by human volition and inexorable social processes, by the "agency" of actors and the "structure" of systems.

What kind of new exploration of leadership might begin to reconcile these dualisms or contradictions?

First and foremost, such an exploration must delve into the anatomy of intended change. It would see humans as motivated by wants and needs that are not only material but a rich and complex mix of physical, psychological, social, sexual—wants and needs that are both inward, for self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and that also look outward for their satisfaction, through the achievement of some change in the world. It would see that change is caused by a host of forces, personal and impersonal, rational and emotional, material and psychological.

Such an exploration would also see leadership as a vital form of power, but would understand power as a relationship based not simply on
the possession of resources by those who wield power, but on the creative, dynamic interplay of wants and needs, motives, values, and capacities of both would-be leaders and their potential followers.

It would view the qualities or traits of leaders as enabling them not only to cope with dire circumstances or situations but to transcend and even to transform them, transforming the people they lead in the process.

Finally, such an approach would give full recognition to the central place in leaders' acts and aims of the great public values—life, liberty, equality, justice, opportunity—that empower pursuits of happiness.