

Reading: We Have a Leadership Problem

By Jennifer L. Jones Barbour

We have a leadership problem. We only have to read the news headlines of the last day, week, month or year to have a plethora of examples to point to as data for this claim. There are leaders who create and sustain cultures of sexual harassment in their organizations, or leaders who threaten violence against their female colleagues, or leaders who misrepresent financial data of their organizations to keep money for themselves while defrauding others, or leaders who make policy that allows an insular few to get what they want while limiting the opportunities of so many more. And these are some of the most egregious cases. There are other leaders who — because of their inability to effectively communicate or solve problems, or their selfishness, or just plain incompetence — create and sustain organizations that are at best dysfunctional and at worst toxic. Whatever the example, the reality is that leadership that is effective and ethical can be hard to find.

We know the impacts that unethical and ineffective leaders have on us and others. So, it would seem obvious that we need to get better people into positions of leadership. And yet identifying people who can be ethical and effective leaders seems an almost insurmountable task at times. Why? The answer lies in our very ideas of who can be a leader. In other words, it turns out that we are very bad at identifying true, effective, ethical leaders. How we think and talk about leadership more broadly in our culture gets in the way of finding and supporting good leaders.

To make sense of this, we need to first talk about our leadership problem. There are several ways we could do so; I am going to focus on two. First, we have a diversity leadership gap. In other words, if you look across contexts in the United States, what you will find is that at entry-level positions in every field, we have relative equity in terms of who are the members of our organizations. But as we look at the leadership positions, whether this is in our companies, politics, sports, whatever, what we see is less and less diversity. Second, we have a leadership crisis. In other words, if you look across contexts in the United States, what you will find is that we don't have enough ethical and effective leaders. These two ways of talking about our leadership problem are connected because the crisis of leadership suggests, as I noted before, that we are not good at choosing our leaders, and our inability to identify people who can be and are already ethical, effective leaders gives us insights into why we have a diversity leadership gap.

What does our diversity leadership gap look like? Even after controlling for occupation, education and experience, minorities are less likely than white men to hold leadership positions.¹ For example, according to the American Council on Education, just 32% of full professors in the United States are women, just 30% of college presidents are women and only 5% are women of color.² This is even though women have made up the largest proportion of the undergraduate student body since the 1970s.³ According to the McKinsey Women in the Workplace Study for 2020, of the more than 317 companies examined and the more than 40,000 people surveyed, only 23% of the senior vice presidents were women, 5% were women of color, and only 13% were men of color.⁴ A January 2020 article in NPR and a January 2021 article in Forbes highlight the NFL's coaching diversity problem. In a sport where 70% of the players are people of color and 35% of the assistant coaches are people of color, in 2021 there were just three head coaches who are people of color among the 32 teams in the league. This is just 9% of the head coaches, the lowest since 2003.⁵ In 2021 27% of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives were women — just 119 women. There are 24 women serving in the U.S. Senate, the highest proportion of female senators in the history of that body. Women of color, young women, low-income women and women who identify as part of the Republican Party are especially underrepresented.⁶ In the entire history of the United States Supreme Court, only 5% of the justices, just seven individuals, have been women and/or minorities.⁷ For many of us, all five of the women who have served on the U.S. Supreme Court have served in our lifetime.

What these statistics point to is that we have a diversity leadership gap. People who could and should be leading aren't able to make it through the leadership labyrinth to those positions of leadership. And this has a profound effect on individuals and our organizations. The ability of an organization to draw on a variety of experiences and insights leads to positive outcomes on every metric that we use to talk about success — everything from productivity to worker retention to financial earnings and more. Not to mention that developing and supporting a diverse organization is the right thing to do.

The second way we can talk about our leadership problem is to make the case that we are currently facing a crisis of leadership. Scholars have argued, for example, that when choosing our leaders, we used to focus on a "historical character ethic" that emphasized things like integrity, courage and other traditional values. Currently, however, we focus on a "modern personality ethic" that emphasizes public image. This focus on public image has led to the crisis of leadership.⁸ Scholars have also argued that our focus on the "myth of leadership," that leaders matter a lot and followers matter hardly at all, has led to a problematic understanding of the actual power of leaders and followers.⁹ As Susan Cain argues, perhaps the biggest disservice done by the glorification of leadership is that "it hollows it out, it empties it of meaning. It attracts those who are motivated by the spotlight rather than by the ideas and people they serve."¹⁰

How we talk about the crisis of leadership highlights the ways that we are obsessed with leadership, want better leadership and therefore identify and describe traits of good leaders all in the service of "making great leaders." The result is bookshelves full of leadership tests and lists and lists of qualities of a great leader. These lists often include things like: be confident, decisive, courageous, charismatic, honest, assertive. The lists go on and on. And what the lists tell us is that we are bad at identifying effective, ethical leaders. The lists aren't really a set of skills or abilities but rather a set of qualities or traits. And the challenges faced by minorities to gain leadership positions point to the ways that perceived qualities or traits can be used against us.

Because traits or qualities of people don't exist in a vacuum. They cannot be separated from the ways they are socially constructed. Leadership traits and qualities are also social constructions. Indeed, research points to the double bind that minorities face in seeking leadership roles. The traits of leadership and traits of our social identities, whether race/ethnicity, gender, ability or others, are often perceived as mutually exclusive.¹¹

But it isn't just that we misapply or don't apply leadership traits to certain people. We also aren't particularly good at identifying the traits in the first place, for ourselves or for others. For example, research on confidence highlights the ways that we often mistake confidence as competence.¹² You can be confident about something but do it completely wrong, which means you aren't competent. We have this leadership idea of "fake it till you make it," which is explicitly asking us to be confident despite our lack of competence. And yet leadership is very complicated, so actual competence is needed.

So, what should we be doing instead? How do we fix our misunderstanding of what constitutes ethical, effective leadership, and how do we choose leaders who will be ethical and effective?

Debunking the myth of leadership is particularly important because it empowers us as followers. Followers matter; indeed, leadership does not happen without the consent of the followers. So more than fixing leadership, we need to fix how we as followers choose our leaders and, in this way, also fix how we socially construct leadership.

One way to do that is to focus on the needed skills of leadership. Focusing on skills moves us beyond thinking about a particular type of worker or member of our community or a particular type of job, which can get us caught up in stereotypes and perceptual biases about the work that needs to happen and the people who should be doing that work. Instead, we need to start thinking about what skills this role requires and what kind of organization we want to be a part of. Then, we must demand that our leaders are people who demonstrate skills such as creative problem solving, communication, and listening and supporting us as we develop and use those same skills. We must seek out organizational cultures that are inclusive and supportive. We need to value the followership of ourselves and others and take it as seriously as we take leadership. If we are going to have leaders who are effective and ethical, then we need to ask questions all the time. Not questions based on socially constructed notions of leadership, but questions about what is needed to get the work done and to move our community forward.

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