

LEADERS OR MANAGERS?³

Always when any key term is ambiguous or of otherwise indeterminate meaning it becomes imperative that all those introducing that term begin by indicating which sense or what sense they favour; and equally imperative that they remain constant in their fidelity to that choice. For the sociologist, as the Marquis de Vauvenargues insisted it was for the philosopher, “clarity is a matter of good faith.”

— Antony Flew⁴

1. First Was the Word

What do you really mean when you utter the word “leader” or “manager”? Meanings of words do not reside in the words themselves, they reside in the minds of people who use them. So let us start exploring the meanings of leadership in the minds of people. It is often said that: “A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanging; it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used.”

In the course of teaching about leadership, I am often asked: “What is the difference between a manager and a leader?” The question itself presupposes the presence *in reality* of two distinct types of human beings: managers and leaders. Those who pose the question forget that words are invented by people and that they do not necessarily refer

³What does the word, “manager” or “leader” trigger in most people’s minds?

⁴*Thinking about Social Thinking*, p. 29.

to human beings in flesh and blood. The question shows how people can be prisoners of words they invented. I found that any answer from me is futile. If I say they are synonyms, some people object. If I say they are identical, I get strong objections. Finally I decided to return the question to the questioners and ask them to provide the answer themselves. That led me to start any seminar by a simple questionnaire and ask the participants to put the answer on paper. Here are the questions that I provide on a sheet of paper where participants were required to write down their answers:

When you use the words “leader” and “manager”, do you think of them as two different concepts or as two words that have the same connotation? Indicate your opinion by circling either A or B below. If you think of them as two different concepts, indicate the differences in the respective columns in the table below.

- a. The words “*leader*” and “*manager*” mean more or less the same to me.
- b. The words “*leader*” and “*manager*” have different connotations in my mind.

The reader may like to respond to this questionnaire before going through this chapter. In one of my seminars I asked the participants to respond to the questions above. I collected data from three different groups. The responses are shown in Tables A, B, and C, in Appendix I. In this chapter I will deal with data from the first of these groups. The data represents the responses of those who indicated that the two terms “lead” and “manage” have different meanings in their minds. Out of a class of 20 participants, 15 indicated that the words “leader” and “manager” have different connotation in their minds. The definitions they offered to both terms are shown in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1
Managers’ view of the differences between the concepts
“leader” and “manager”

Case No	LEADER	MANAGER
1	Always considers subordinates first. Dares to make decision in the absence of fact.	Has a proper path to follow.

Case No	LEADER	MANAGER
2	A leader is able to motivate, initiate something which others may follow. He may be a manager.	A manager has a leader's characteristics. It is important that a manager has a leader's character.
3	Provides strategic direction and guidance. Listens actively to staff grievances and pertinent issues and (escalates) reports to senior management to seek resolution.	Manages a team of staff.
4	Does the right things. Sets the vision and directions of the organization.	Does the thing right. Implements to achieve set objectives. The end justifies the means. Manages resources: time, manpower, materials, budget.
5	A leader can be elected. A leader has followers to lead. A leader leads but not necessarily manages. A leader sounds lower-end.	A manager is appointed. A manager may have subordinates. There are sometimes managers without any subordinates. A manager manages. A manager sounds high-end.
6	A leader is not necessarily a good manager or one who can manage.	A manager can manage but may not have leadership qualities.
7	Visionary, authoritative, eminent, enthusiastic, veto power.	Planner, enterprising, obedient, cautious.
8	Manages the followers or supporters to do right things. Must possess good values in order to lead by example. Total commitment.	Encourages staff to do things right. Have good values but are assertive to carry out instructions. Committed during working hours.
9	A leader to me is always a manager in one form or another. Even in the most mundane activities, a leader will always have some form of managing to do.	A manager is not always a leader.

Case No	LEADER	MANAGER
10	<p>Provides the vision.</p> <p>Determines the "where" and the what.</p> <p>Needs to empower people.</p> <p>Sets direction.</p> <p>Takes risks.</p> <p>Takes uncharted waters.</p> <p>Develops and creates new ideas.</p>	<p>Plans and organizes the implementation of the vision.</p> <p>Determines the now and the "when".</p> <p>Needs to motivate people.</p> <p>Implements direction.</p> <p>Manages risk.</p> <p>Sails on chartered waters.</p> <p>Produces ideas.</p>
11	<p>A good leader portrays a good manager but a good manager does not necessarily portray a good leader.</p> <p>He reflects credibility of the person but in a manager it reflects glamour.</p>	<p>A manager takes most responsibilities formally and requires training as a leader. Lack of leadership skills in the manager results in mismanagement and chaos.</p>
12	<p>A leader is one who possesses attitudes that others around him look to guidance, help and support.</p>	<p>A manager leads as well as:</p> <p><u>Plans</u>: must have a vision beyond the immediate time frame;</p> <p><u>Executes</u>: sets, tends towards getting things done and will not accept lack of action when it is needed;</p> <p><u>Controls</u>: supervises, monitors and obtains feedback so that actions may be amended if necessary.</p>
13	<p>Not necessarily seen as a manager.</p>	<p>Manager must prefer development apart from the normal tasks.</p>
14	<p>Covers a broader perspective. Cares about the welfare of its (sic) employees.</p> <p>Concern about the long-term objectives of the organization.</p> <p>Encourages a two-way communication between all levels.</p> <p>Hold the good values of the organization.</p>	<p>Limited to specific assignments or tasks.</p>

Case No	LEADER	MANAGER
15	<p>A leader is one who has the power to influence another person or group of persons in the way they exercise their choices.</p> <p>The power possessed by the leader is attained either by means of his social status, economy, political, religious, military or even charismatic charm.</p> <p>A leader is not necessarily a manager. A leader leads people; a single person without a follower cannot be a leader; whereas a single person could be assigned as a manager to perform specific function with allocated economic rewards.</p>	<p>A manager is one who is accountable and responsible for specific economic rewards (human, machines, tools, assets, etc.) For the purpose of specific objectives.</p>

2. Interpretation of the Responses

Subject No. 1

Let us examine the responses given by 15 managers in Figure 1. Note that these are among the managers who stated that the two terms “leader” and “manager” refer to different types of people. Respondent no. 1 tells us that a leader “considers subordinates first”. Does the respondent imply that a manager *does not* consider subordinates first? And no mention of what comes next. He adds that a leader “dares to make decisions in the absence of facts”. What he may have meant was that a leader is characterized by risk-taking and that making decisions in the absence of facts is an asset that differentiates a leader from a manager who just follows a predetermined path.

Subject No. 2

“A leader motivates and initiates”. So far the response makes sense. But the next statement “a leader may be a manager” contradicts the initial assertion that leader and manager have different connotations. The respondent goes on to tell us that “it is important that a manager has a leader’s character”. Conceptual muddle is glaringly evident.

Subject No. 3

The respondent attributes a specific function to a leader, namely “provides strategic direction and guidance”. Since he stated at the outset that a leader is different from a manager one would rightly infer that a manager does not provide the same. However, the respondent does not openly say so. Instead he tells us that a manager “*manages* a team of staff”. Respondent defines a word by itself. The second response assigns two specific functions to a leader: a) listens to staff grievances, and b) reports them to higher authority for resolution. How about the manager counterpart? No mention.

Subject No. 4

The first response is: “The manager *does the right thing*” in contrast to the manager who “*does the thing right*”, a fancy cliché devoid of meaningful information. The second response is clearer: “A leader has the vision and sets direction of the organization while a manager implements, and handles material and manpower.” In other words: a leader thinks but the manager just implements.

Subject No. 5

The issue of election comes up for the first time. What distinguishes a leader from a manager is the different ways they come to office. The former is elected while the latter is appointed. A second distinction lies in the fact that a leader has followers but a manager may or may not have subordinates. Then the respondent runs into a problem as he realizes that a leader leads but does not necessarily manage but a manager manages, period.

Subject No. 6

We encounter again glaring conceptual muddle when the respondent tells us that a leader is not necessarily a good manager and that a manager may not have leadership qualities. Why then did the respondent indicate at the outset that the two terms denote different meanings? Here we witness semantic muddle associated with logical confusion.

Subject No. 7

No. 7 offers us a list of adjectives that glorify a leader, cognitive (visionary), emotive (enthusiastic) besides having a high standing (authoritative, eminent and powerful). Another list of adjectives, two of them refer to managerial functions (planning and enterprising) and two suggestive of low status (obedient and cautious). I wonder how the respondent sees himself. All we know from his responses is that it is far better to be called a leader than a manager.

Subject No. 8

We encounter once more the cliché “Doing the right thing” versus “doing things right”. The former characterizes the leader while the latter characterizes the manager. It would appear that “doing the right thing” is superior to “doing things right”. The last item in the response is interesting: a leader is totally committed but a manager is committed only during working hours.

Subject No. 9

The respondent sees no difference between a leader and a manager.

Subject No. 10

Vision versus implementation comes up again so does the theme of superiority of a leader over a manager. The former sets direction and the latter implements. In other words, a manager is really a follower. Reference to time orientation shows up for the first time in this batch of responses: a leader “determines the *where and the what*” but the manager determines the “*now and the when*”. In addition the leader *empowers* people but a manager “*motivates*”. Again, a leader is superior to a manager.

This respondent makes the differentiation on the basis of attitude to risk, the leader takes risk but the manager just manages it. Then he adds another unclear difference related to creativity, namely the leader “develops and creates ideas” but the manager “produces ideas”. He probably means that the manager implements ideas, careless use of words.

Subject No. 11

Respondent number 11 appears confused by the overlap between the two terms. He seems concerned with what makes a good manager in contrast with a good leader. “A good leader *portrays* a good manager, but a good manager does not *portray* a good leader.” The respondent does not explain what “portrays” mean. He becomes even more ambiguous, or maybe, muddled when he adds that “he [?] reflects credibility of the person, but in a manager it reflects glamour”. What does the pronoun “he” refers to is anybody’s guess. Reference to credibility versus glamour suggests muddled thinking.

Subject No. 12

This respondent brings followers into the picture. A leader is one who have [sic] followers who look to him for guidance, but the manager is one who does things: plans, executes and controls.

Subject No. 13

This participant failed to substantiate his initial claim that the two words have different connotations in his mind. In fact he failed to provide any information.

Subject No. 14

A person whom this participant calls leader “has a wide perspective”: cognitively, he “concerns himself with long-term objectives of the organization” and interpersonally he “encourages two-way communication”. In contrast a manager is one that limits his activities to specific tasks. In short a leader is superior to the manager on both counts.

Subject No. 15

This participant differentiated between a leader and a manager in terms of power. The former has more influence and attains more power than a manager. He adds “charismatic charm” to the virtues of a leader. He also showed awareness of the literal meaning of the word “leader”.

A leader leads people but a manager does not have to. A manager may not even have people to deal with. Finally while the word leader evokes power and influence, the word manager evokes accountability.

3. Summary of the Findings

First, the most striking finding is that participants were more fluent when defining the meaning of the word leader than in defining that of the word manager. The word count of the former category is 336 words compared to 243 words for the latter category.

Second, all attributes ascribed to leader have positive connotations. They assert the leader's superiority to a manager at different levels of functioning. At a cognitive level, a leader is one who "thinks strategically", "builds up support for a vision", "is innovative", "has wide perspective", "focuses on organizational objectives", "plans, directs and guides". The opposite attributes characterize a manager who tends to be "conserving rather than innovating", "deals with specific tasks", and is "more bureaucratic". At an interpersonal level, the leader is "concerned with the well-being of people", "encourages interpersonal communication", is more "risk-taking", and may even have "military and charismatic charm". It is evident that all these responses display the subjects' evaluative attitudes that honors a leader and demeans a manager. In view of this attitude, one wonders who would ever want to be called a manager. And yet the respondents were in fact managers and were enrolled in a seminar on management development.

Third, the differences between a leader and a manager become much sharper when the participants make the comparison on the basis of power and influence. A leader "exerts and acquires more power", "is authoritative and eminent", "determines the where and the what", "has power to influence another person or group of persons", "attains power by means of his social status", and "has followers to lead". In contrast a manager "executes", "implements directions", and "carries out instructions". In other words, the word leader evokes ideas of power, authority and independence but the word manager evokes accountability, submission and obedience.

Fourth, some of the responses are either stereotyped slogans or make no sense at all. Examples are:

- ❖ a leader does the right things

- ❖ a manager does the things right
- ❖ a leader sounds lower-end
- ❖ a manager sounds high-end

Fifth, often participants fail to draw the line between both concepts. Here are some examples:

- ❖ a leader may be a manager
- ❖ a manager has a leader's characteristics
- ❖ a leader is not necessarily a good manager
- ❖ a manager can manage but may not have leadership qualities

Sixth, the responses given by 15 participants may be summarized by one statement: "A leader is a good boss and a manager is a mediocre one."

4. Theoretical Implications

I must add a word here about the participants who were generous enough to participate in the exercise. They are all middle-level managers, university graduates, and are more-or-less successful in their respective careers. They are eloquent, clear, and rational when they talk to you. But when they put down their responses on paper, they became ambiguous, and sometimes illogical if not incoherent. It seems that talking and writing are two different modalities of communication. It may well be that the discrepancy between the two situations are specific to some common words and should not be generalized to other words. Participants may have always used these two words assuming that they were somehow different but have never really thought about the difference nor have they ever cared to test their assumptions against other people's thinking.

I advise the reader to inspect the responses I gathered from the other two groups, B and C in Appendix I. I decided to spare the reader the boredom of going through the whole lot because I thought that the current sample is fairly representative of the entire population. The reader may arrive at the same conclusions that I arrived at but may also find other features that I missed.

Personally, I have no quarrel with using any word as long as the user tells me what the word means. The term leadership is often used

in a very loose and general sense to group together indiscriminately a vast array of behavior tendencies and personality traits. I took pains to pursue with increasing specificity the various dimensions of what people loosely call leadership. After all, meanings of words do not reside in the words themselves but in the minds of people who use them. Either term is a label we choose among many others to refer to a person holding or assuming a given position or enacting a given role. So the choice of the term is a matter of convenience. It is arbitrary. We must bear in mind that when we use either term we are no longer talking about an abstract position but about a *holder* of a position. Our focus should be on the functions that a person is supposed to fulfill, what he actually does, and how he or she goes about fulfilling it.

When my grandson was four years old, he was fascinated by the tools I keep in the drawers of my desk such as a stapler, hole-punching tool, paper cutter, scotch tape, and several other gadgets. He would pick up, say, the stapler and asks, "What does this *do*?" He would then pull the scotch tape and asks, "What does this *do*?" He picks up one gadget after the other asking the same question about each. Immediately after I tell him what the object *does*, he proceeds to use it with great enthusiasm. Often he discovers other usages it was not invented for. For him, the name designates an object that must have a specific function. So it is the function that makes the object relevant to the child. And it is relevant simply because he *intends* to use it. The child knows what semanticists have been telling us all along, that *the name is not the thing*. A name that does not point to a function, an event, or an action is useless. This is as true to an adult as it is to a child. That is why I always advise my students when we talk about a person in a leadership position it would be safer first to use the verbs such as "lead" and "manage" or the verbal noun "leading" and "managing". The verb or the verbal noun has the advantage of referring to observable action occurring in the context of a situation which specifies the time, past, present or future.

Going back to the issue of the differences between manager and leader, what matters is what a person in the position of authority is supposed to do, is expected to do, intends to do, or is actually doing. *Doing* is what defines the holder of a position. If we happen to have two distinct sets of functions, it would be perfectly legitimate to give them two different names. It is equally legitimate to use synonyms to denote the same set of functions.

In any group, formal or informal, we cannot find a particular *slot* to be occupied by a leader and another *slot* for a manager. There is work to be done and we need an individual to be in charge of the work. What that person does will define him or her. And what a person will do is partly determined by the responsibilities assigned to him or her. However, usually the incumbent of a position has a certain margin of freedom. Such margin allows him or her to stress features which another person in a similar position would naturally ignore.

The word leader has acquired more prestige than the word manager. The latter acquired more prestige than the word administrator. The prestige dimmed the importance of many other aspects. During the 1970s, some universities decided to change the name of their schools of *business administration* to schools of *management*. Other schools followed the new trend, the “*me too*” phenomenon. I was at the time Professor at what used to be the Graduate School of Business Administration of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The university decided to adopt the new label. School of Management sounded more respectable. All professors cheered the decision with the exception of one, our eldest. He was indignant. To him the new label was demeaning and even vulgar. After all, he once confided to me, the President of the United States refers to his “Administration”, not to his management. Words have different meanings. That we know, but they also have different histories and different prestige. Moreover, the prestige acquired today may be lost tomorrow.

The most valuable lesson I learnt from the exercise I reported above is never to take it for granted when people use the same word that the word means the same thing to every one of us. The study prompted me to explore the concept of leadership in different languages. This I did to the best of my ability benefiting from my familiarity with Arabic, my mother tongue, English, French, and the Malay language. The latter I hardly know, but the dictionaries helped. I included the results of this exploration in the next chapter of the book.