

Leadership in the Business Context: A Viewpoint

Since the dawn of human civilisation, people have always been categorised as either leaders or followers. This notion of extreme separation has become the dominant mainstream whether the subject of discourse was the individual person, a pack of homo sapiens (for the lack of better terminology), peoples and nations, or the human race altogether. It is so intrinsic to our social norms, our theological doctrines and even our conspiracy theories - and for the sake of clarity, this is not an allusion that all are one and the same - that a lot of us tend to believe that this separation is an unalterable notion that underpins the basis of our existence. In this article, my intention is not to delve into the intricacies of this argument, but rather to just broach the subject in the context of the modern business ecosystem, and present my viewpoint. I have to stress that this is merely a very personal opinion and has not been endorsed by the company I currently work for or by any other company I have worked for in the past or have ever been associated with.

In my opinion, leadership is a term that has been overly used and abused in the business world. We live in a culture of consultative abundance, yet somehow we seem to have collectively failed to come up with a better professional title. If anyone has actually taken the time to concoct metrics for professional titles and run the relevant data, I kindly invite them to share their conclusions. To all the others, please take a quick look at your LinkedIn contacts and you will get my point. Many leadership theories have been published over the last few decades, and serious authors have dedicated extensive time and effort (some of them a lifetime) to researching, observing, analysing and making conclusions. I've had the privilege of access to some of this leadership literature; and the more I read, the more I wondered whether we still understood the essence of leadership or have dangerously veered off track. I surmise that by institutionalising leadership, we seem to have exorcised the spirit that gives it its spark. In my opinion, neither everyone is a leader nor can they be. It's about time we came up with a new professional term; maybe then and only then, would leadership have a chance to recover its allure.

It is my contention that in the business world, there are implicit agreements between the so called leaders and followers. A deal has to be struck, an entente of sorts so to speak; and like any other deal, it will only stand as long as the involved parties adhere to its terms. Also, like any other deal, the parties should be able to choose to agree on whatever terms they wish, provided of course that these terms comply with the legal and ethical constraints applicable to the business in question. However, for a deal to be viable and durable in my view, it should address four key aspects in a manner that is perceivably favourable to all involved parties. Prior to discussing these aspects though, I think it's key to assume here that there is a deal out there for each and every one of us. Sometimes, we stumble upon one by sheer luck, and at other times, we try hard to find one and maybe compromise a little along the way. Sometimes, we are befooled by the temptations of a seemingly glamorous deal that turns out to be a shred of crookery. What matters most is that we don't lose our compass and remain able to correct course before it's too late. We should be conscious that any deal, by virtue of its formation, is finite in nature even if it appears not to be. Even if its formal construct doesn't provide for termination, if any of the involved parties loses faith, the deal will absolve itself de facto whether the other parties like it or not. Last but not least, any deal should be crystal clear on the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the involved parties and should be predicated on each party being sufficiently empowered, adequately qualified and undeniably capable of fulfilling their part.

The first aspect of a viable deal is what I like to call the Pride and Prejudice dimension, and I seek permission here from Jane Austen for using the term as well as forgiveness for imbuing it with a personal interpretation. Pride and prejudice are two plates of a high precision balance scale. Pride in this context is waking up every morning with a heightened sense of satisfaction in what we do to the extent that we let it define who we are. It's important for people in business leadership positions (again for the lack of better terminology) and those who are in more managerial, front-line execution or back-office support roles to be proud of what they do on

all levels. Pride gives meaningfulness to what we do, instigates our passion and allows us to pour bits of ourselves into our work. Prejudice, on the other hand, sneaks in riding on our unconscious bias and pits us against others who are perceived to be our peers, superiors or subordinates. There's a self-polarising instinct in us humans (or so I believe) that on one hand we would like to fit in within a group, and on the other, we'd like to stand out on our own. The compromise is obviously to fit in within a group that stand out, a peerage of sorts, and the more exclusive this group is, the more content we are, yet the more obnoxious we become. Whilst we've come a long way in embracing diversity, there's still a much longer way to go before we can even come close to understanding let alone eradicating unconscious bias. Whilst pride drives motivation, prejudice works in the opposite direction. The dilemma here is that we obviously want to tip the balance in favour of pride, yet at the same time not fall into the trap of trying to eliminate prejudice by submitting to its terms. The point here is that while constructing a deal that favours pride seems to be preaching the obvious, it's easier said than done. Prejudice in many ways lurks in the shadows of pride.

The second aspect is Vanity, and I have to seek permission from Miss Austen once again and emphasise her submission that vanity is our inordinate preoccupation with how others think of us. It is indeed the devil's favourite sin, to quote *The Devil's Advocate*, and I believe it is deeply moulded into our psyche. It is a hornets' nest that can be easily stoked, and any viable deal in my view should put up a screen around this nest to keep the hornets locked in. Sometimes, I can't help but think that this may be one of the reasons behind the pervasive abusive employ of the leader title across the business world. Irrespective of that, the public image of the parties involved in any deal should be complimentary, but never inflated to the extent that it becomes detrimental. It's a tight rope to walk on, again easier said than done; nevertheless, crucial to make any deal successful.

The third aspect is Progression. Whether by design, evolution or mere necessity (believe what you may), humans are constantly moving forward. It is that urge to grow, to be better, to become more powerful, and to reach that elusive destination that keeps us going. There has to be an element in any viable deal that addresses individual aspirations and lights up the array of possibilities. We have to see that element in order to really buy into any deal and give it our best. You may call it a vision, a dream, maybe just a step change or simply a target; however, whatever it is, it has to be worthy of pursuit for the concerned party. It is ironic that we know in our hearts that we take our real pleasure from enjoying the journey, however, it is always the destination that matters to us the most. It's a mental challenge that we have never been able to conquer. A deal without a clear progression scheme is only a transient shelter. The parties will give their best to plan their exit and will abandon ship as soon as a slightly shinier deal makes its first appearance.

The forth aspect is what I like to call the Spoils. In business terms, these are the potential material benefits that the subscribed parties would enjoy, should they decide to enter into a given deal. Material benefits, whether nominal perks or significant financial gains, are the most primal incentives for us humans. On some level, they are the embodiment of the aforementioned three aspects, and in certain situations, may be the most relevant, the most appreciated and the most impactful. Whether we like to admit it or not, each of us has a soft spot for materialistic indulgence; however, the extent to which each of us is willing to compromise for the purpose of enjoying such indulgence varies greatly. The flip side however is that the spoils, by virtue of their materiality, are short-lived. A durable deal has therefore to offer more than spoils.

In my view, leadership in the business world is the ability to forge viable and durable deals that create a community of leaders, first by choice, then conviction and finally admiration. It is a pact among equals each fulfilling their part in a thriving enterprise. For this very reason, I urge businesses to shy away from using leader titles and stick to old-fashioned job titles that reflect that actual job that the professional does; i.e., their actual part of the deal.

