

The Five Myths of Leadership



“In no other area of management education is the concept of myth as prevailing as in leadership.” – Jeffery Pinto, Project Leadership: from Theory to Practice

Agile project management is more closely aligned to leadership best practice than traditional project management best practice. However, the domain of leadership is rife with myths and misconceptions. It also has an “elitist” reputation which puts most people off wanting to learn more about it since our sense of humility guides us away from pursuing such egotistical goals. This produces a vicious circle, we have these misconceptions about leadership, but because it seems egocentric we leave it alone and do not overcome them.

This is a shame because when you strip away the myths; leadership is really about team work, empowering others, and putting the goals of an endeavour above personal goals – quite the opposite of elitist, egocentric behaviour.

Let’s explore and slay the five myths of leadership...

1) Myth: Great Man Syndrome – Leaders must have some elusive, larger-than-life, “rock-star” personality to be effective, otherwise people will not follow them.

Slain: While some leaders do have charismatic personalities it is not a prerequisite to being an effective leader. In fact in the book “Good to Great” Jim Collins profiles the personality types of the leaders behind the companies that met the Good to Great success criteria. Of all the companies with stellar performance they examined, only 11 companies achieved the long term growth and stability required to meet Collins’ strict “Great Company” categorization. Interestingly, all 11 of the leaders demonstrated high levels of “Humility and Will”. These “Level 5 Leaders” as Collins calls them, get less media coverage than flamboyant, arrogant, ruthless executives that sometimes deliver short term wins via radical changes or cost cutting.

Instead, by humility and a dedication to purpose they have quietly but systematically built (or transformed ordinary organizations into) the very best companies in the world. Many of the leaders profiled were described as “quiet”, “reserved”, “awkward in public settings” yet were amazingly effective. Collins’ research suggests that being humble, but unwavering towards the right goals, are far more important characteristics than larger than life personalities. You do not need “rock-star” personalities, instead strive for humility and willpower.

2) Myth: Leadership is only for CEO’s and other senior roles – Leadership techniques are not intended or applicable for “ordinary” workers.

Slain: While the term “leader” is most often associated with senior executives the goals and roles of leadership which include: “Model the way”, “Inspire a shared vision”, “Challenge the process”, “Enable others to act”, “Encourage people”, etc apply equally well in a project setting, problem solving group, or voluntary groups. The truth is that Leadership is everyone’s business.

Wherever a group forms with a common purpose, the skills of leadership can be employed. It is not just people either, recent studies on [leadership in cows](#) suggest that intelligence, inquisitiveness, experience and good social skills help to determine which animals will become leaders within herds.

The findings suggest that size and strength are not recognized as suitable leadership qualities. Researches observed: “Whenever the herd was allowed access to a new feeding site, cow #7 usually was the first to investigate. When she moved toward the new food site the other cows appeared to acknowledge her judgment and followed behind her. Affinities exist between particular animals, and indicated that #7 might have had past success at leading the herd to new food sites. it’s adaptive to the animals to follow successful leaders, as this will improve their own food research success.”

So, leadership being just for CEO’s is, well bullshit, it is for anyone (or any creature) interacting in a group.

3) Myth: Leaders are born not made – you either have the leadership traits and skills or you don’t, they can not be learned.

Slain: This is simply not true. Leadership skills are learnable traits that with study and practice can be improved.

Like with athletic performance, people are born with a certain skill levels that may predispose them well for leadership. However, unlike athletic performance, training and practice will continue to see linear improvements in performance without ceilings or plateaus. Keep at it, learn from others, learn from your own mistakes, and you will continue to become better at leadership.

4) Myth: On projects, Leadership is the responsibility of only the project manager - PMs on projects undertake all the leadership duties.

Slain: Leadership is often linked to strategy and plans, the domain of the project manager, but anyone on a project can step-up and take a leadership role. This does not need to threaten or undermine the role of the PM, instead it can be taking responsibility for a problem or issue.

Recently a developer on my project took responsibility for owning and solving a particularly complex interface problem. He saw the problem, observed how people we struggling with it, suggested a solution, rallied support and collaboration which solved the problem. This is an example of Situational Leadership. He was not in control of the project, but saw that he was in a position to lead the charge on a solution. Rather than feeling threatened by team members taking a leadership role, I’m relieved, here’s an empowered team in action; and one less problem for the project.

5) Myth: Leadership is about control and telling people what to do – leaders direct the work to be undertaken and define the steps towards the end goal.

Slain: Leadership is not about command and control; instead it is about getting people excited about a common goal and enabling them to achieve it. Leaders do not specify exactly how things must be performed, instead they gain buy-in for a solution, try to align project goals with personal goals, then leverage people’s ingenuity to achieve a result.

Telling people what they should do leads to, at best, performance rated as “passive compliance”. Leadership aims to create performance contributions in the “passionate innovation” range. Get people united and fired-up about a goal then let them go at it and support them all you can.

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Overcome the 5 Myths Of Leadership and you will discover how to tap into a rich source of practical tools that can help in all walks of life.

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