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Think of the children: Leader development at the edge of tomorrow

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Abstract
Leader development has traditionally focused on adults. However, evidence suggests that these efforts are limited to developing and refining skills, encouraging some reflection, and helping the learners plan for the future. The underlying problem is that these are people whose brains are fully developed and relatively set. Hence, adult leader development works with what is already there. In this controversial essay, we argue that leader development activities should instead be directed towards children. Their brains are forming and leader development work will create and shape the leaders of tomorrow. We draw the important caveat that relatively little is known about influencing leadership in young brains making this a fertile and exciting, if challenging, area for leader development research.

In *Edge of Tomorrow* (Hoffs et al., 2014), Major William Cage (Tom Cruise) finds himself in a time-loop. He is thrown into a brutal battle against aliens from which he cannot escape or survive. When he dies, he is reborn to live the day again until his next death. With each iteration, he tries different options, learns a little more, and performs slightly better, until the day's macabre conclusion. The key turning point in the film is when Cage is introduced to Dr. Carter (Noah Taylor) who explains why this is happening to him and the importance of killing the Omega, the controller of the aliens. From this moment on, Cage has purpose, his multiple deaths have meaning, and he is relieved of the futility of his existence.

The plot of *Edge of Tomorrow* is frighteningly analogous to the life of leadership developers. Each day, they go to work knowing the tragic nature of their jobs. The people attending their courses want to be transformed into leaders, but developers know the best they can do is develop and refine skills, encourage some reflection, and help their students plan for the future (Day, 2001; Crosby, 2017). The developers learn from each iteration and become more efficient and effective at their trade, but ultimately, they know that they are teaching corporate followers whose leadership character is largely set (Gabriel, 2005). They cannot transform these people into leaders despite their best intentions, but they keep on going seduced by brute capitalism to provide remedial help for failing managers (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Frustrated with the emptiness of their condition, they die a little every day.

In reviewing the current state of the leader development literature, Jackson and Parry (2018) acknowledge what leader developers have long known: Leaders are created by their experiences and the process of gaining experience cannot be hastened (McCall, Lombardy, & Morrison, 1988). However, rather than drawing the natural conclusion that leadership developers need to be intervening in the developmental processes as leadership character is formed, Jackson and Parry (2018) are diverted like most before them into the relatively ineffective pursuit of providing

experiential opportunities for people whose future behaviour is already largely determined. Instead, if we want to influence the leaders of tomorrow, we need to be shaping the children of today. These are the people whose leadership character is dynamic and these are the people upon whom leadership development activities can have a lasting impact (DeHaan, 1962; Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005; Sacks, 2009; Salmond & Fleshman, 2010).

We are not saying that adult leadership development is totally ineffective, just 'relatively' ineffective compared to the opportunities that exist with younger people. Their brains are more plastic (Fuhrmann, Knoll, & Blakemore, 2015), their ideas about leadership and their leadership skills are developing and are likely to become ingrained and shape their behaviour and attitudes in later life (Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005). Adult leadership development is working on brains that are trending towards stability, whereas the young brain is considerably more plastic and much more likely to internalize new ideas and skills (Kühn & Lindenberger, 2016). We should also add that although most writing on leadership development focuses on experience, a person's leadership character is also partly determined at birth by their genetic, hormonal, and neural make-up. At present, we do not know how much is attributable to these factors and how much to experience.

Unfortunately, whilst the logic of focusing leadership development on children rather than adults is compelling, there are many unanswered questions that mean it is not presently possible. First of all, we are still naïve in our understanding of how children conceptualize leaders and leadership. We know that children as young as those in kindergarten possess a concept of a leader (DeHaan, 1962; Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009), children as young as eight have a concept of effective leadership behaviour (Yarrow & Campbell, 1963), and there are gender differences in the way children perceive leaders (Broich, 1929; Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005). We also know that there are development trends in how children define leadership (DeHaan, 1962) and there are key developmental turning points around the age of 10 when leadership becomes more functional and towards the end of schooling when it includes more humanitarian elements (Pigors, 1933; DeHaan, 1962). But our understanding of these conceptualizations is still in its infancy. We do not know, for example, the nature of children's prototypical implicit leadership theories (ILTs).

Secondly, we are greatly limited in our understanding of how children's leadership character develops. Although Nicholson (1998) argues that people's leadership behaviour is hardwired from birth, child leadership studies have shown it is dynamic, contextual, and can be shaped. Sacks (2009), for example, showed that posters in a school promoting a set of approved behaviours (e.g., respect, responsibility, and honesty) influenced the children's leadership trait perceptions. She argues that the education system could have an impact on children's emergence as leaders by giving them leadership experiences through sport, community, and fundraising activities. We also know that early relationships or experiences with leaders are fundamental for the establishment and development of leadership conceptualizations in children (Pigors, 1933; Rosenblith, 1959). Nevertheless, we still have little idea about how much of children's emerging leadership character can be influenced or changed, or how this might be done, but there is evidence to suggest it may be possible.

Thirdly and perhaps even more critically, scholars are unclear about the type of leadership required in the future (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Typically, they begin their papers with concerns there are as many definitions of leadership as there are writers on the subject. And this is certainly the case. After thousands of years of leadership scholarship (e.g., since Lao Tzu, Sun Tzu, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato, through Machiavelli and von Clausewitz, to the current day), we seem no closer to finding an agreed definition, theory, or approach to the topic and we are left floundering about producing increasingly esoteric ideas. As soon as we start interfering with the development of children, we must be sure about what we are trying to achieve. Are we looking for particular skills and abilities, or particular attitudes, or particular visions? Or perhaps, we have to reconceptualize leadership as an ethical issue around virtue (Jackson & Parry, 2018) or as a psychological construction, which is likely to make this debate a partisan political war.

Anyone who has spent any time in schools will know that throughout the schooling years, teachers are keen to develop leadership in their pupils. They have a vast array of mechanisms for giving children the opportunity to experience being in a leadership role: school captains, head boy or head girl, house captain, prefects, monitors, captains of sport teams, class representatives on school council and other bodies, running charity drives, adopting a student from overseas, organizing school productions, and so forth. The list is almost endless. Occasionally, this is a developmental initiative open to all, sometimes these are elected positions (an interesting leadership experience in itself), and sometimes *fait d'accompli*, but where they can influence these opportunities, teachers commonly choose those pupils who have demonstrated relevant leadership qualities in their eyes and exclude the rest. As such, this approach tends to be a reinforcement one rather than a systematic and deliberate strategy designed to improve leadership across the class. Moreover, this is a 'sink or swim' approach where occupation of a role is typically the limit of the developmental experience. Instead, we envisage a future where teachers are empowered as leadership developers with deliberate and systematic approaches that help all their students realize their leadership potential.

It might seem that we have taken the reader from the futility of adult leadership development to the futility of leadership development in children. That was not our intention and whilst there are no ready answers now, this is an exciting time for leader development. The deficiencies we described above represent excellent areas for future research. For example, studies might explore how the content of children's ILTs is populated and the ways that they develop. Further, we know very little about how people's multiple basic level ILTs form and interact with each other (Rosch, 1978; Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000). Understanding these formation processes better would inform adult leadership development as well as in children. Equally importantly, we need to study the impact of existing approaches to leadership development in children and develop and trial new approaches. Although addressing these questions will be difficult, scholars working on these will have the satisfaction of knowing their efforts will have more impact on leader development than many of the contemporary studies of adult leader development. Tomorrow has not arrived yet, but perhaps our Dr. Carter has spoken, told us to think of the children, and thereby given meaning to our future leader development endeavours.

Postscript

We are delighted to contribute to this Special Issue *of Journal of Management and Organization* dedicated to the memory of Professor Ken Parry. Ken was a much beloved colleague of ours at Deakin University in the final years of his life. At all times, he was helpful, considerate, a joy to work with, and always stood up for what is right. Beyond this, he was an exciting colleague to talk to. His ideas were radical and informed, thought-provoking, and illuminating. He always encouraged us to think beyond the mundane and to challenge the status quo. We hope the provocative nature of our essay would win his approval and ignite the fire in his eyes.

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