

# Leadership re-examined



Alex Knight has left to become leader of Goldratt Consulting. On his departure he discusses leadership, followership and beyond with his colleague and coach, Samreen Khan.

Alex Knight is an Associate of Ashridge Consulting Limited, having led the development of Ashridge's consulting activities as Managing Director for the 10 years until February 2003. His passion for consulting is borne out of strong beliefs about helping organisations achieve radical breakthroughs in strategy and performance. His development of ACL's methodologies has been built on the principle that the success of its clients is dependent on their ability to continuously innovate and evolve in the new economy.

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**Alex Knight:** I am at a time of genuine transition, so it feels like a good moment to reflect on my own experiences of leading a group of highly capable professionals, as well as consulting to many leaders around the world. So, as my coach, will you help me?

**Samreen Khan:** *I would love to. My sense is that a re-frame of leadership is desperately needed.*

**AK:** I find my own observations out of line with most of the current leadership literature. I think the current models are flawed. This is an audacious challenge, but I think many of the current leadership development models are excellent extrapolations of a leader's development needs which, themselves, are derived from many of the long standing leadership models. My challenge is aimed at the heart of these models. If you agree with this challenge, you are agreeing with the need for a substantial rethink about the implications of this new leadership paradigm. It is the responsibility of us all to think through and act on these wider implications.

**SK:** *So what is this rethink and what implications do you suggest we are responsible for acting on?*

**AK:** For me so little is talked about the subject of followership. Why? Do we think that it is better for everybody if the issue of followership is left untouched? What kind of inner need on the part of those who research into leadership does this single focus serve? How can it be for everyone's good to concentrate exclusively on one side of the leadership-followership relationship?

**SK:** *I notice an emotive challenge coming from you. Alex, you seem frustrated, what effect does looking at leadership from a leader-centric model have on you?*

**AK:** Given the traditional approach to leadership – looking into (or up to) the leader's role only – leaders can be easily seduced by this artificially created special status and see it as a reward for all the years of effort they have put into their job.

**SK:** *Was that your experience, were you seduced by the status as a leader?*

**AK:** Yes and no. The temptation is high, at times I have indulged but I have also learnt this is a flight to nowhere.

**SK:** *What is the likely impact on the follower?*

**AK:** I experienced the follower's perspective as "... it is justified for me (the follower), to expect them to carry out special leaders-only activities, such as to set motivating visions, or come up with new routes through troubled waters, take care of me. Yes, I will follow and do as I am told because that's what I am paid for in my no-frills, follower's package. However, if I make it to the top, then I will also expect the due rewards and frills."

**SK:** *Putting a leader on a pedestal as the focus can grant followers permission to withdraw and become apathetic, setting up an unhelpful expectation and dynamic.*

**AK:** Socially constructed in this way, only strong leadership from the front is required and any doubt or perceived weakness is unacceptable. How does a leader rock the boat and still keep a steady hand on the tiller?

**SK:** *As your follower, I experienced you hopscotch between provoking innovation and visible change and protecting the security of the organisation.*

*Compromising one for another was never an option for you. I remember several times I encouraged you to pick a third way, to go all the way with it. It was perhaps a strong challenge at the time, in retrospect. To find a way out and go with it is a challenge and requires a slightly deeper examination of self and the choices that a leader must make, despite a temptation to be pulled in different directions.*

**AK:** Yes, the leader is an individual with their own needs and feelings and the choice of action is deeply attached to ensuring these needs are met. Being an effective leader and a happy leader are two separate things.

**SK:** *I learned from you that a happy leader has two equally important needs. One is the very human need of getting satisfaction from being a leader, and my*

*observation of your leadership has been about embracing the role of a total servant, inspired by Peter Block's stewardship model. To you, doing this requires taking risks, achieving breakthroughs with and for the organisation; achieving the impossible! The second and equally important need for a happy leader is to have personal security, particularly in this exposed and complex role; it is no surprise that at times you had to stick to what has worked in the past and is likely to work again.*

**AK:** Many times I have seen leaders struggle with these dilemmas with the result of living an intolerable compromise. Some leaders are seduced into the dependable role of a visionary, promising the riches of pastures new and embarking on many tough decisions to deliver them. Those were the circumstances where I saw leaders lose sight of the values they have been crafting for their entire career.

Like the proverbial knight in shining armour they reduced the enemy of the vision, often the number of heads, with a single swipe of the sword – or an expensive fountain pen. When the followers didn't follow, they became bitter and twisted. They began to demand loyalty to the vision even when it was painfully clear that it was not such a good idea in the first place. Many such examples occurred when the actions to achieve the vision required the followers to suspend their needs that originally attracted them to the visionary leader. For example, cost cutting is fine until it is my head on the block, centralisation or integration are fine, too, as long as I can keep my independence.

**SK:** *A leader who broke this dilemma shared with me his dream of "creating an organisation where we all reach for our own individual stars and contribute equally to the organisation!" Ring a bell Alex? Where do you perceive the followers are in all of this? What is their role?*

**AK:** The follower's role is the one that really matters. Having created the best possible environment for shooting for the stars, their role is



Samreen has been a consultant with Ashridge Consulting for five years, consulting to individuals across industry sectors, geographies and leadership roles in strategic change. Her consulting focuses on coaching 'leaders of tomorrow-today'; facilitating groups to deepen organisational learning and on aiding strategic thinking. She also delivers large scale management and leadership development, specifically focussing on cross cultural challenges and opportunities, strategic change and individual and organisational development and growth.

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to go for it. To bring to bear all the intuition, emotion, logic and skills they can muster to do fabulous work for the customer and to support the ongoing development of themselves, their colleagues and the organisation as a whole. It is only then that the true potential of the human spirit is released.

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The funny thing is that in this environment all that stuff that leaders are supposed to do, such as set objectives and carry out appraisals, becomes redundant. People are being and working from a different mindset and doing it for themselves. The relationship is transformed into a working partnership. You don't sit down with your wife, husband or partner and have an annual review of performance and agree improvement goals, so why the hell do we need to adopt such practices at work?

**SK:** *So what do you advocate to an organisation, based on your experience?*

**AK:** First and foremost is financial transparency. Don't hide the bad numbers and don't dampen down periods of outrageous profits; teach people to read the numbers and ensure that they see the whole picture and not just their part.

Second, all promotions should be initiated by the individuals concerned, once they believe they can achieve the next hurdle. After a supporting peer review, it is the management team, not the boss, who ratifies the promotion. Ongoing peer

review is essential – you can fool your boss but not your peers.

**SK:** *Being one of those who had to go through this process not once, not twice, but three times as one of the youngest consultants in ACL, I valued it. I did feel however the recognition from the organisation is just as critical and needed as is self-evaluation and promotion.*

**AK:** Samreen, this was something that came as a complete shock to me. It was the first moment that I realised that unless I genuinely invested in listening to the next generation how would I ever be able to fulfil my role of building an organisation to last?

This also helped me think differently about leadership teams. So thirdly, bring in the people who want to do it and not those who are the best at it. Develop a culture where a role on the leadership team is undertaken as a turn in office and celebrate movements on and off the team. Invite leadership outside of the leadership team. Nobody should want to say "I don't do that stuff – that is what the leader is paid to do."

Fourthly, work on yourself as a leader. Don't expect any special treatments. Open plan offices and hot desking for all. I hated it at first, but for me it became valuable learning.

**SK:** *About?*

**AK:** About... at best, modelling the leadership I believe in, which at worst meant genuine exposure. I know I was not perfect but I tried to model as much as I humanly could.

**SK:** *Where do you seek space and reflection for yourself with such exposure?*

**AK:** That brings me to the fifth point – coach and let yourself be coached by others. Good coaching is like helping a blind man see colours, for he can appreciate colours exist but he does not see them. Samreen, our coaching relationship has grown

over time. Whenever I found myself feeling stuck with an issue I sought out your coaching and advice. I gradually realised the huge benefits of being mentored by the next generation. Seeking space for myself also meant being ruthless about spending time with the people with whom I shared a level of confidence and trust to get support and counsel.

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separate things.

Sixthly, in a wider social context, see leadership as a job not a place on a pedestal. See leadership as a project with short-term objectives and long-term implications. Leadership is also about doing the professional job, not just leading from outside. I also do not believe in leadership courses for the top few. I integrate my own development with that of my colleagues.

Lastly, organisations matter. The community is as important as the individual to me and developing a sense of community in us all is at the core of the leadership–followership relationship and I believe the biggest challenge and opportunity.

**SK:** *This sounds like one of those dangerous success formulas to me, Alex.*

**AK:** Oh no! ‘The seven steps to organisation heaven’. It is time to move on! █