

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revitalising leadership for a humane world

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Abstract

After two decades of expanding leadership scholarship and mounting critique regarding dominant leadership theory, there is a need for a radical revitalisation of leadership thinking. A dialogic, humanist and contextualised orientation to leadership, long progressed by Ken Parry charts a direction for this work. But a truly revitalised leadership field must also involve a multi-dimensional and explicitly values-driven approach that places the roles, rights and responsibilities of leaders and followers – and the relationships between them – at its heart.

Key words: leadership; leadership theories; qualitative methods; values

Prof. Ken Parry's back catalogue is a lesson in the ebbs and flows of leadership theory over at least two decades. Ken's work moves across numerous dominant leadership concepts such as transformational and transactional leadership, charismatic leadership, entrepreneurship, followership, change management and leadership development. But it is in the area of methodological advances and opportunities for understanding and thinking leadership anew, that Ken made his mark. He was a champion of critical, discursive and at times 'unconventional' methodologies (Kempster & Parry, 2018), and his work led the field in grounded theory, critical realist, auto-ethnographic and narrative approaches (e.g., Boyle & Parry, 2007; Kempster & Parry, 2011; Parry & Kempster, 2014).

While wide-ranging, what remains consistent in the breadth of Ken's work is a core dialogic and humanistic understanding of leadership as well as an impulse towards making a positive difference on the ground, in the weeds, and amongst the workers. From his early research on the process of enhancing adaptability (Parry, 1999), and the relationship between leadership and organisational contexts (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002, 2003; Parry, 2004), to his more recent work regarding leadership 'in the eyes of followers' (Kempster & Parry, 2013) and distributed situated forms of leadership-as-practice (Cope, Kempster, & Parry, 2011; Smollan & Parry, 2011; Kempster, Parry, & Jackson, 2016), Ken's work has consistently pointed to the special nature of the leadership process and the importance of upholding the integrity and innate leadership potential of all those involved.

By contrast, mainstream leadership inquiry has not always followed such a relational, egalitarian or contextualised view of leadership. A number of critical scholars have noted a preoccupation within dominant leadership theory over the 20th and early years of the 21st century with the distant heroic leader to whom organisational failures and victories can be ascribed (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Sinclair, 2007; Raelin, 2016; Collinson, Jones, & Grint, 2018). Through an impressive apparatus of quantitative tools and analytic techniques, the skills, attributes and behaviours of top leaders have been analysed, measured and evaluated in ways that sever individual leaders from their

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relationships, their organisational contexts and the broader environment. The heroic leader has at once become an aspirational requirement and an impossible reality for those working with and guiding groups in their endeavours.

Over the last two decades critical scholars have increasingly challenged such 'leadership science' (e.g., Alvesson, 1996; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007). Integral to this has been the work of those like Ken who have sought to expand our tools for inquiry of the leadership process and to extend the epistemological and ontological possibilities of this field. But further, within the context of an ever-expanding terrain of leadership research, those who have stepped back to rethink the purposes for which leadership is enacted (e.g., Kempster, Jackson, & Conroy, 2011), the values and norms underpinning leadership within specific contexts (e.g., Sinclair, 2004; Holmes, 2007; Tourish & Tourish, 2010; Voegtlin, 2016), and how leadership is viewed and understood in different social, spatial, economic and cultural contexts have been crucial (e.g., Faris & Parry, 2011; Zhang, Cone, Everett, & Elkin, 2011; Wilson, 2013). (These references are given here as a tiny indicative set of a growing field of critical and alternative thinking about leadership (see also special collection of Leadership journal, 'Rethinking leadership', Tourish, no date).)

In 2019, the world sits teetering on the precipice between hopeful potential and almost overwhelming social, technological and environmental threat. In this context, there is an urgent need to draw the threads of progressive leadership theory together to inform a multi-dimensional and explicitly value-driven framework for revitalising leadership. Taking the lead from Ken Parry and others, we need to employ a contextualised, leadership practice-in-context approach that places the roles, rights and responsibilities of leaders and followers – and the relationships between them, at its heart (Wilson, Cummings, Jackson, & Proctor-Thomson, 2018). Furthermore, the objective of such thinking must go wider and farther than the previously dominant focus of functionalist expansion of commercial objectives. Leadership theory and practice for a humane world will require consideration of the philosophical, social justice, aesthetic and embodied outcomes of leadership practice. Values that foster human well-being, the development of human capability and sustainable forms of ethical leadership must be our guide (Wilson et al., 2018).

There are infinite potential manifestations of such leadership. In contrast to the high profile visionary leader that is so valorised, such a revitalised leadership must build up from the small, daily operational conversations that are embedded in the relationships between people. These conversations will be founded in mutual obligation and reciprocity; both formal 'leaders' and 'followers' will have recognised agency, but also responsibility to contribute their energies and ideas. Inequality within relationships and organisational and institutional structures will be identified and where possible actively redressed. Open and explicit sharing of agendas and acknowledgment of the diverse motivations of people within organised groups will be required. For those in formal roles of authority particularly, this will involve the complex skill of holding paradox while leading forward (Wilson et al., 2018).

Some of us may have been lucky enough to witness some version of this type of leadership, particularly in small flat organisations where the owner-operator works directly with their staff. Humane relationships are forged, all members are part of decision-making, and the embodied, moral and distributed outcomes of decisions are considered. In larger organisations, a revitalised leadership approach needs to be practiced in a daily relational sense, but also needs to be built into the material of the organisation; that is, built into the structures of authority that provide shape to the organisation; built into jobs through 'good work' design, and built into decision-making processes through shared and collegial models of participation and consideration of diverse stakeholder outcomes.


While there may be isolated examples of organisations moving in this direction, dominant thinking about 'leading from the front' remains influential and continues to set aspirations for practitioners. Part of the persistence of this fantastic image of leadership is that it floats above the complex, material specificity of real-world contexts. Hero leadership lives as a Teflon hope;

one that does not risk getting dirty in the messy mire of human life. Thus, the best hope for seeding a revitalised and humane leadership in practice, is to charge academics and practitioners alike with the responsibility of consistently contextualising their thinking about leadership and what it means to be a leader. This will require studied resistance to the cycle of ever-new and seductive decontextualised theories of leadership that so often capture our attention.

While the type of revitalised thinking about leadership sketched here goes beyond the ideas developed by Ken, his legacy of understanding leadership as a social process in context, his advancement of methodological inquiry, and his enduring respect for others, will live on and guide thinking on leadership for many years to come.

Reflective note

Ken Parry made manifest his vision of leadership in his own life. He was my first ‘boss’ when I joined the Centre for the Study of Leadership at the Victoria University of Wellington as a research assistant in 1999–2001; but on reflection over some years he is also one of the best bosses I will probably ever have. He understood my strengths and development needs, he challenged and pushed me when I needed it and supported me onwards as I moved out to develop my own academic career. In my working life and my scholarly endeavours I have often tried to channel what I learned from Ken about leadership in practice and theory. It is fitting then that in the year of his passing, I along with my colleagues, fed forward some of Ken’s ideas in new ways in ‘Revitalising leadership: Putting theory and practice into context’ (Wilson et al., 2018). I have drawn heavily from the arguments made in this text in the piece above.

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