

## Leicester's lesson in leadership

S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen D. Reicher suggest a leader is not 'the special one' but 'the one who makes us special'

The one most important word: 'We'  
And the least important word: 'I'  
[Idea 42: A very short course on leadership: Adair, 2009, p.101]

It is probably in our history classes at school that we are first exposed to the idea of leadership. And, most likely, this encounter serves to couple the concept closely with notions of heroism. Think Elizabeth I, Churchill, Aung San Suu Kyi, Wellington, Gandhi, Mandela. Of course, there is a dark side here too (Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin) but, nevertheless, from an early age we are encouraged to see leaders, above all else, as individuals with some special quality that eludes ordinary mortals.

And so, when we aspire to become leaders ourselves, the question in our head is characteristically whether we too have that special quality. Are we made of the right stuff – a stuff that allows us to outshine mere followers? It is a highly profitable view, both for those who run costly training courses to help us discover our inner leader and for leaders themselves who can use the idea of exceptional qualities to justify exceptional salaries. It was not for nothing that former Chelsea FC manager José Mourinho styled himself 'the special one'.

But then again, perhaps

it was. For the point at which Mourinho became convinced that he was 'special' appears to have been the starting point for his decline. Indeed there is a long history of leaders whose success seduced them into thinking that they were above everyone else, who came to believe that they alone knew what to do, and who thereby transformed success into failure. Hubris. Think Tony Blair.

The problem, then, is not simply that it is wrong to think of leadership solely in terms of the characteristics of the individual leader, but that by doing so we actually compromise performance and organisational effectiveness.

The simple reason for this is that, as Warren Bennis has repeatedly observed, leaders are only ever as effective as their ability to engage followers (e.g. Bennis, 2003). Thus, however great their vision, leaders are more likely to be dismissed as



lunatics than lauded as heroes if they cannot convince others both to share their vision and to work hard to translate it into material reality. Without special followership, special leadership is nothing.

The task of the leaders, then, is not to impose what they want on their followers, but to shape what followers want to do for themselves. In order to achieve that, leaders can't succeed simply by stating what they themselves believe. Instead they must shape and articulate what they and their followers jointly believe. And to do this, they must start by listening. The problem with those who are so fixated on their own brilliance and who are so captivated by the sound of their own voice is that they never hear the voice of others. And as a result they lose any ability to craft a common voice. In short, then, the key to success in leadership lies not in an old psychology fixated on the individual 'I'. It lies in the collective 'We'.

To see this in action it is instructive to move to Leicester – as the BPS did when it moved its head office in 1976 and, more famously, as Claudio Ranieri did when he took on the manager's job at the now world-famous football club in 2015. Coming into the job, pundits were sceptical to say the least. Leicester City had narrowly avoided relegation the previous season, and were 5,000-1 shots for the title. (To give context, it was considered five times more likely that the Queen would have a Christmas number one single). Ranieri had a terrible reputation as 'the Tinkerman' – a reputation cemented while he himself had been the manager at Chelsea and had contrived to throw away a Champions League semi-final through an unnecessary substitution in the 62nd minute of the



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game that 'destabilised his team so badly they threw away a winning hand' (Wilson, 2016). Why did he do this? We don't know for certain, but, as Wilson notes, one possible reason was that he was 'tempted into an eye-catching substitution to emphasise his agency'. Far from shining light on his skills as a brilliant leader, tinkering was his undoing.

Yet Ranieri's passion for tinkering was hardly a solitary one. Indeed, his actions mimic those of many a corporate manager whose penchant for restructuring belies a desire to show the world what a great leader they are. Reviewing such enthusiasms in the medical world, Jeffrey Braithwaite and his colleagues describe

## How stars make a team implode

We live in an era when it is common for organisations to look to improve performance by importing great stars and expecting them to lead others to greatness. In business, in sport, even in academia, the logic is that buying in talent will boost the profile and fortunes of the team and elevate them in relevant league tables. But is this correct?

Reviewing the evidence for this hypothesis with reference to the leadership literature, Hollander (1995) argues that in fact the presence of highly paid 'stars' more typically fosters a sense of inequity and unfairness within the team and that this ultimately compromises group cohesion and effectiveness. Amongst other things, he bases this conclusion on evidence that the discrepancy between the remuneration of those in leadership positions and rank-and-file members of an organisation tends to be negatively correlated with organisational performance.

This analysis was subsequently supported by Matt Bloom's (1999) classic study of 29 major league baseball teams in the US and Canada. Over an eight-year period he observed that a high level of intra-team disparity in pay (typically associated with the introduction of a few highly paid stars) led to a dramatic reduction in both individual and team performance. As he concluded: 'These data raise questions about the efficacy of raiding high-priced talent' and explain why attempts 'to buy success by purchasing the potential performance of high-priced talent have met with mixed results at best.' (p.38). As Claudio Ranieri's experiences at Leicester suggest, they also imply that working to unify a team around the talent one already has will represent a better return on investment. Indeed, in his first press conference after winning the Premiership, Ranieri said: 'I don't want the big names here, I don't want to break the dressing room. My lads are special... we want to grow up together.'

It is also notable that virtually all of Leicester's squad are 'bargain basement' signings who had been rejected or overlooked by other clubs. Was their evident team spirit forged around a shared sense of rejection? Whatever the basis of the bond, it was powerful: as the celebrations got under way, full-back Danny Simpson tweeted 'I swear to god I fucking love this team. You don't understand. No one does...'

this 'restructuring as gratification' as a toxic blight on the organisational landscape (Braithwaite et al., 2005) – noting that: 'Evidence for this making a difference, let alone demonstrably improving productivity or outcomes, is surprisingly slender... Where there are studies, they challenge rather than support restructuring' (p.542).

By the time that he arrived at Leicester, this was a lesson that Ranieri had learned the hard way. No longer was his coaching a matter of imposing his personal will on the team; rather it was a matter of helping the team discover and impose their *collective* will:

When I spoke with the players I realised that they were afraid of [my]

tactics. They did not look convinced, and neither was I. I have great admiration for those who build new tactical systems, but I always thought the most important thing a good coach must do is to build the team around the characteristics of his players. So I told the players that I trusted them and would speak very little of tactics. ... They so need to be relaxed and not harassed. They expect calm and respect in the dressing room, so if you want to be a prima donna, they won't forgive you for it. (Percy, 2016)

It helped in all this of course, that within the Leicester team he had no 'star players' or runaway egos to manage and that he had inherited a squad that understood all too well that if they were to succeed this would be a collective not an individual achievement. Hence when Riyad Mahrez stepped up to receive the 2015/16 PFA Player of the Year Award he announced: 'All the credit is for [my teammates], seriously. And my manager and the staff. Without them I wouldn't receive this award and I wouldn't score. It's the team spirit. I want to dedicate it to them.'

Of course, this is the stuff of media training on which all professional

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sportswomen and men now diet. The difference was that Mahrez meant it – and we *know* he meant it. For Leicester City is a team that dines ravenously on we-ness and Ranieri is now head chef.

Importantly, though, we-ness is not just a recipe for football. Amongst other things, that is why, as the democratic involvement of the citizenry has increased over the last century, the three words whose use has increased most dramatically in State of the Union Addresses are 'we', 'American' and 'people' (e.g. see Sigelman, 1996). Leaders move their listeners not when they talk about themselves as individuals, but when they speak as the voice of the people.

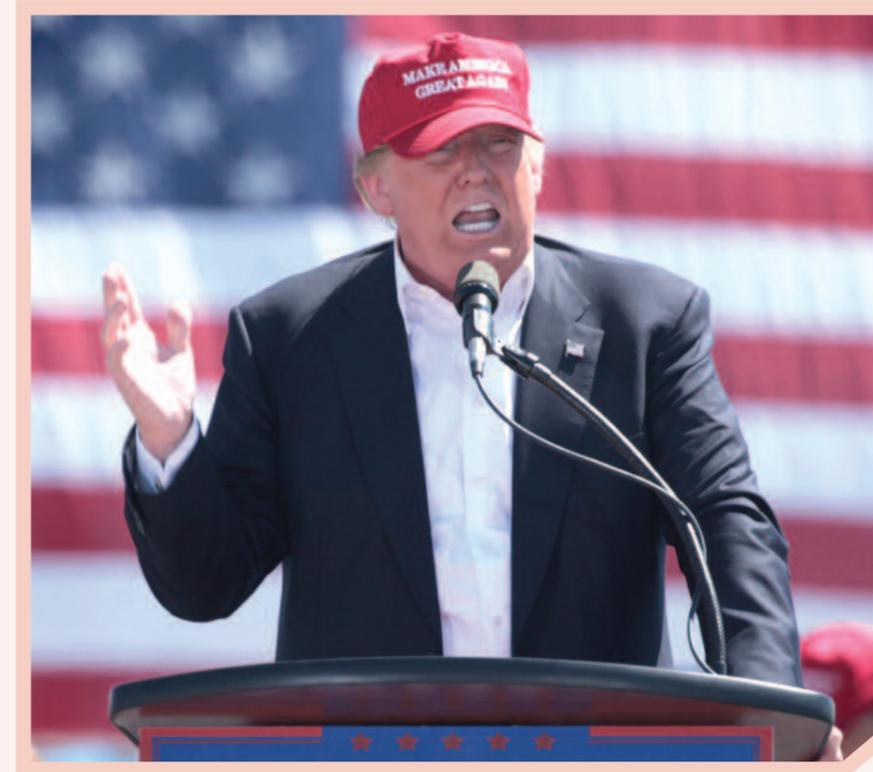
This point is confirmed in a study led by Nik Steffens that forensically picked over the content of the election speeches made by leaders of the main Australian political parties dating back to Federation in 1901 (Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Leaders who went on to win the election used the words 'we' and 'us' once every 79 words, whereas losers only used these same words once every 136 words. Moreover, in 34 of 43 elections the winner was the candidate who invoked the idea of 'we' and 'us' more frequently.

The importance of speaking for the group is at the heart of what we refer to as the 'new psychology' of leadership (Haslam et al., 2011). More formally, we argue that leadership emerges from a relationship between leaders and followers who are bound together by their understanding that they are members of the same social group. An American President is bound to the electorate by

'I first got interested in leadership about 20 years ago when I was asked to give some lectures on the subject to organisational psychology students. My background was in the study of groups and identity, and I was immediately struck by two things. First, that these were incredibly relevant to leadership dynamics but, second, that they were largely overlooked by leadership theorists – whose perspective on the topic tended to be hyper-individualistic. After this, the more applied work I did, the more fired up I became about the need to tell the true story about leadership as a group process.'



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**What matters for Donald Trump to succeed is not that he be a man of the people, but that he is seen to be a man of the people**

being seen to be prototypical of an American identity they share. Managers can be leaders only to the extent that those they manage see themselves – and identify with – the organisation or organisational unit that is being managed.

In these terms, the primary task of leadership is not to cultivate a sense of one's own superiority or specialness. Rather it is to forge, promote and embed a sense of shared identity. Leaders, as we have put it, are *entrepreneurs and impresarios of identity* (Reicher et al., 2005). What they communicate will be influential only to the extent that they speak to, and help entrench, a collective viewpoint. To be more specific, our ongoing research suggests that leaders need to communicate three things:

- I that they are *one of us* – that they share our values and our concerns and understand our experience;
- I that they are *doing it for us* – that their efforts are aimed at advancing the good of the group; and
- I that they are *making us matter* – that their actions and achievements are a practical expression of our shared beliefs and values.

There are many ways in which leaders can communicate their group membership. The most obvious will be through what they say about themselves – especially about their background and

childhood. For instance, in the first ever active campaign for the US presidency, William Henry Harrison's supporters characterised him as the 'log cabin and hard cider' candidate – a rough-and-tumble man of the people – as opposed to Martin Van Buren who was depicted as wealthy and effete (Whitcomb & Whitcomb, 2002). No matter that, in fact, Harrison was rich and van Buren poor: Harrison won by a landslide. Likewise today, what matters for Donald Trump to succeed is not that he be a man of the people, or at least, as an embodiment of the American dream (so different from 'those other politicians').

Returning to football, though, it is clearly the case that foreign managers often face an uphill struggle to be seen as insiders not outsiders (Sygall, 2013). This, then, is something they need to really work at. The importance of this was something that the Dutch coach Guus Hiddink recognised all too well when he arrived in Australia for what would turn out to be a very successful spell as national coach (taking them to the knockout stages of the World Cup before they were controversially beaten 1–0 by the eventual winners, Italy). Commenting on Hiddink's approach to the task, the Australian Assistant Coach Graham Arnold observed:

The thing that really stood out for me

with Guus was that he was a marvel at wanting to understand the Australian mentality. He didn't want to change anything. He frequently said to me 'I need to become Australian. They don't need to become Dutch'. He just wanted to improve what we were already good at – the never-say-die attitude – he didn't want to change us. A foreign coach works when they buy into it, when they try to really understand what we're about. (cited in Sygall, 2013)

This is clearly a copybook from which Ranieri has taken several leaves. Indeed, from his first day as manager he was keen to make it clear that it was not he who was special but the team (and league) that he had come to serve. As he announced in an interview on Leicester City's website:

For me it was really important to come back to the Premier League. I've missed the Premier League, I've missed English football. English football is special – the fans, the crowd, the atmosphere is very warm in every stadium. I love the respect in England.

But identity is not just a matter of words. Most importantly of all, we communicate who we are by what we do – and by what we are seen to do. Shared identity needs to be walked as well as talked. Anything that divides leaders from followers, and that undermines their claim to be 'one of us', equally undermines leadership effectiveness. It was often said in the past that the curse of British industry was the Directors' canteen. In the present their pay is more likely to be the source of toxicity. For as managers pay themselves too much compared to workers, productivity goes down (in universities too: the greater the differential in salary between a Vice-Chancellor and ordinary staff, the worse the research assessment outcome).

A while back, we did a very simple little study. We asked students at the beginning of the year whether they thought they were a good leader. Then, at the end of the year, we asked who they thought, amongst their number, actually was a good leader. The findings were striking. Those who thought themselves to be leaders from the start were least likely to be chosen as leaders down the track. Why? Because a fixation on the self got in the way of learning about the

group and ultimately being able to represent it.

This is a salutary warning against a romantic model of leadership that glorifies 'I' to the exclusion of 'We'. It is a powerful illustration of the dangers of falling in love with one's own reflection. It is a lesson that is relevant not only to students, but to political and business leaders as well.

And it is also relevant to football. José Mourinho's failures follow a trajectory from 'We' to 'I'. It is a trajectory that lost him the support of his followers both on the pitch and

on the terraces. Just ask a Chelsea fan.

In total contrast, Ranieri's redemption follows a trajectory from 'I' to 'We'. That is the source of the efforts and energy that have driven his team to success. It underlies their joint ability to make history and could be seen clearly in the faces of Leicester fans – and residents of Leicester – as the Premiership trophy was lifted.

"Without special followership, special leadership is nothing"

## A wider impact?

Will the city of Leicester change now Leicester City are champions? Certainly, many claim that there are such effects. After West Germany won the World Cup in 1954 there was a sense that the country now had something positive to unite around and be proud of. Equally, when France won the 1998 World Cup under the leadership of Zinedine Zidane, it was said to herald a new embrace of diversity and multiculturalism at the heart of French identity. And now, in 2016, the Bishop of Leicester, Martyn Snow, asserts that 'the impact of this [victory] on the city and the country is huge and will last for many years to come'. Are these claims fact or fanciful thinking?

That is an issue that we – a joint team from the Universities of Canberra, Queensland, Otago and St Andrews, coordinated by sports psychologist Katrien Fransen from the University of Ghent – are in the midst of investigating. Earlier this year we took advantage of the Rugby World Cup final to conduct longitudinal surveys and diary studies in the countries of the two finalists: Australia and New Zealand. Our supposition was that victory would be a moment when everyone could imagine their compatriots sharing the same thoughts and feelings. This would allow them to talk to anyone, even complete strangers, knowing that they would respond positively. You could go into that corner shop you have been in daily for years, but for the first time say to the server 'Wasn't that fantastic last night!', knowing they would smile and answer positively.

It is still early days in the analysis, but what is clear for now is that, in victorious New Zealand, the quality of interactions did indeed improve after the final, as did people's sense of self-efficacy, and their sense of well-being. This matches a pattern we have found elsewhere in our studies (with Nick Hopkins) on the effects of collective participation: emergent shared identity creates a sense of intimacy with other group members and the expectation of continuing support from them. This in turn affects physical as well as mental well-being.

Will it endure? We shall see. At the very least, it is clear that such events define an important research agenda, one which addresses the various ways in which collective experience shapes our everyday psychology and even our everyday physiology.

'Just like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, who didn't realise he was speaking prose, for a long time I didn't realise I was studying leadership. I came from the study of crowd behaviour, which led to an interest in mass social influence and collective mobilisation. As an activist as well as an academic, I was fascinated with political rhetoric – at its best a combination of poetry and stand-up comedy. I began to analyse how effective mobilisers used social categories to define their audience, define themselves and define their relationship. I was fascinated with the idea of such mobilisers as *entrepreneurs of identity*. And then it was pointed out to me that actually, this was leadership (albeit not in the organisational contexts that tend to predominate in this area). Now I look back, it seems quite obvious that I had been looking at leadership all along.'



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