

# Aspiring to Lead:

## Hard-wired to Manage

- Lester Levy and Brigid Carroll

The UABR team would like to apologise for an error in the current issue (Spring 2008, Vol. 10 (2)). In the article "Aspiring to Lead: Hardwired to Manage" the footnote numbering within the main article text was accidentally removed. The sources that are quoted by the authors are listed at the end of the article.

By Lester Levy and  
Brigid Carroll

# Aspiring to Lead: Hard-wired to Manage

Management and leadership are shaped by each other in subtle and overt ways. Recent New Zealand based research reveals new dynamics between management and leadership and offers promise for new thinking and innovation in terms of leadership development and organisational performance.

Is an executive's last waking thought each night how to become more of a micro-manager? We doubt it. It is more likely that they will dream of being an inspiring leader, skilled at making strategic choices which result in breathtaking performance gains and unimaginable success. Why is it then that when they wake, they earnestly and without shame, assume the mantle of the consummate micro-manager? Why, when an executive could be an inspiring, imaginative, visionary and highly relational leader would they want to constantly demand a torrent of superfluous, exhaustive reports, require relentless, detailed monitoring and distract people with bureaucratic trivia? Why would they impede information transfer, constantly dither over direction, have a need to sign off every document and attend every meeting, squander valuable time on activities that should be delegated and fail to focus on their own core responsibilities?

This is not simply an apocryphal anecdote, rather it is a scenario that is alarmingly real.

## Why is the desire to lead overwhelmed by the need to manage?

Our research creates a new concept for understanding this phenomenon, which is deeply embedded in the relationship between management and leadership. The debate about this relationship has been



Dr Lester Levy,  
Chief Executive of  
Excelerator:  
The New Zealand  
Leadership Institute

Dr Brigid Carroll,  
Senior Lecturer at  
The University  
of Auckland  
Business School

a set piece in the literature for decades now and has moved through the essential differences between the two concepts,<sup>1</sup> their complementarity<sup>2</sup> and more recently their interdependence.<sup>3</sup> While theorists disagree over the nature of the exact relationship between management and leadership, they do agree management and leadership can be distinguished from each other through the nature of skills, behaviours, techniques, and activities. Leadership and management essentially draw from different personal and positional resources, representing a different spectrum of activities and concerns.

## Is it the person or the problem?

Two of the most contemporary current approaches to the relationship between management and leadership depart from traditional thought by posing their differences not in terms of position, skills

or tasks but as mindset, intentionality and context. In the first approach, a distinction is drawn between “technical work” (known problems that can be solved through proven solutions) and “adaptive work” (unknown or uncertain problems that require a new process to create solutions).<sup>4</sup> Technical work lies primarily in the domain of management and adaptive work in that of leadership. To a certain extent the context and nature of the “problem” may determine whether an issue is technical (requiring management) or is adaptive (requiring leadership). However, it is the choices and capacity of executives to hold uncertainty and foster learning that ultimately determine whether a management or leadership response is applied.

The second approach argues that management and leadership capacities are formed by executives' preferences and comfort with positional authority (management) and uncertainty (leadership) as opposed purely to anything inherent in a specific problem.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of these new approaches, management and leadership should be considered as distinctive strategies, mindsets and responses that executives need to be prepared to exercise when any management or leadership moment or challenge presents. This moves us nearer to seeing management and leadership as a complex intersection of self, work, and organisation.

## Identity matters

Our research develops further the recent interest in the fashion of leadership and what is perceived to be the corresponding decline in the value of the management.<sup>6</sup> Building on these recent studies, we have considered the seductiveness of the leadership identity by asking what makes certain identities more appealing than others and what material effects do management and leadership identities have on self, work and organisation.<sup>7</sup>

Pause to think about your own identity as it relates to your management and leadership contexts and challenges. When we talk about identity it is in the frame of understanding how executives function within organisations. We seek to reveal the ongoing and elusive efforts of executives to understand who they are and aren't, what they do and don't do, and what they should and shouldn't do.

We investigated why certain identities hold more power and appeal than others, and what consequences a shift in the collective pursuit of one identity over another might have on the nature of self, work and organisational life. For those engaged in any level of management, leadership has become the expectation, building on the proposition that the management identity has become a negative position.<sup>8</sup> We investigated the extent to which management and leadership identities rely on each another and how the existence, effectiveness and power of each in the relationship between them might be better understood.

Recent research identified that when executives are allowed to explore their understanding of leadership in depth, their understanding of it seems to disintegrate or disappear.<sup>9</sup> It transpires that leadership is difficult to define and understand. Executives seem unable to call to mind the characteristics of leadership using any specifics from within the context of their own work. Overwhelmingly, even those executives identified as being engaged in leadership reveal themselves to be mired in bureaucracy and administration, expressively termed "the extraordinaryisation of the mundane."<sup>10</sup>

## Is it more important to know who I am or who I am not?

Think about it... one of the ways you narrow down the answer of who you are, what you do and what you stand for is by being mindful of who you are not, what you don't do and what you don't wish to be thought of. The notion of "who I am" (identity) and "who I am not" (anti-identity) are essential components in shaping the relationship between leadership and management.

We propose that identity research provides a strong platform for better understanding the management/leadership relationship and its implications for the realities of organisational life.

Leading researchers identify the anti-identity as an identity that is explicitly negative and one they seek to avoid or escape from.<sup>11</sup> However, our research showed that while management clearly

had some anti-identity associations, this was not solely due to the usual oppositional perspective. Management had associations with a default identity that is so ingrained and indeed comfortable, that it is reverted to automatically. It is almost as if executives are "hard-wired" to default to management. It is for this reason that we propose to move away from the concept of anti-identity to a newly described concept of default identity, which is prior to and more deeply established than the more emergent identity of leadership.

Consequently, we propose a set of three criteria that can help delineate a default identity beyond the initial and too readily oppositional statement of "who I am not".

- Sequence: A default identity is a prior identity (management) to the emergent (leadership) identity.
- Emotion: A default identity has a different emotional quality than the alternative emergent identity.
- Association: A default identity and the emergent identity have a relationship of complicity, whereby the latter needs to be understood in relation to the former (not necessarily in the reverse). In other words the emerging, desirable identity (leadership) is intertwined with the default identity (management).

## The question is leadership, the answer is management

This theorising of management as a default identity was the central finding from a large series of interviews with senior executives to determine how they actively create their identities. The executives were asked to characterise leadership, but virtually all the executives spontaneously initiated conversations about management.

Immediately evident in the data (see examples below) was the vagueness in the executives' definitions and characterisation of leadership which highlighted what is considered as mysterious, confusing and intangible about leadership:

- "Leadership is right out of my natural comfort zone because it is intangible"
- "There's more that we don't understand about leadership than we do"
- "To be honest, leadership is all a big unknown to me"
- "I don't think there is a key to leadership, in fact, I'm positive there's not"
- "Leadership for me is a confusing array of heaps of things".
- "I know it sounds like I'm waffling, but leadership is a hard thing for me to describe"

It is striking that most executives seemed to fully accept the "mystery" which is leadership without concern. We argue that

# Need a new perspective on business?



## You need to talk to us

Shopping for a consultant or looking to outsource part or all of your business? Looking at expanding in the domestic market or growing into an international market?

The Business Store covers the range of advisory services a business may require. We provide leading methodology and process for our clients and guarantee our work. Our delivery is world class at the same time as being affordable. We believe in mutual risk and reward as well as a return on your investment. Call us to find out more.

phone (09) 950 3800 or email [info@thebusinessstore.biz](mailto:info@thebusinessstore.biz)  
[www.thebusinessstore.biz](http://www.thebusinessstore.biz)

**the Business Store**  
Making business bigger, better, faster

this high degree of comfort with vagueness and intangibility on the part of the great majority of executives invites urgent scholarly curiosity. This contrasts with the specificity of the executives' definitions of management where they confidently reeled off checklists of activities with certainty, an example of which can be found in the narrative of one of the executives in the study: "Management is the day to day running of the team, making sure that individuals are abiding by the rules and following the right processes and procedures. Management is planning, budgeting and those un-emotive tasks."

## Stepping into the mind of the executives

While executives attempted to define management and leadership separately, they were also asked to understand them together and in relation to each other. It was immediately evident that management came tagged with many qualifiers and adjectives. Management was presented as "boring", "mundane", "not challenging" and as something that leadership is "more than". Management was "just" management for most executives with the implication and often stated proposition that leadership is the next step and the next challenge. Interview transcripts were full of qualifiers like "more", "just", "less" and "next". Often, leadership was described purely by these comparative connotations, meaning that leadership only made sense as "more" than management, which would surely make its separation from management meaningless. While the negative nature of many

of these statements is unmistakable, the tone of resignation is equally important to note.

In one executive's narrative, management is "almost comfort food", "concrete" and "nitty gritty" and constantly threatens to impose if its invasion is not resisted. In contrast leadership is "the whole great big thing", "a bigger view", "rather nebulous", and appears to provide an escape route out of "micro-management". For this particular executive, leadership represents doing different kinds of things that might be "all important", but are removed, distant and shadowy compared to the more immediate demands of management.

The analysed data satisfied the three criteria established earlier in the theorisation of the default identity.

- Sequence: Management activity is what dominates and anchors current experience, while a stronger leadership focus promises a reorientation in how executives and their employees would accomplish their work.
- Emotion: A mixed energy characterizes the management identity with management typified as "passionless" with "dangerously comfortable associations" contrasted with the esteem, focus, scope, value and significance associated with leadership.
- Association: The managing and leading evident in the data reveal a strong element of being intertwined and associated with each other.



## What does it all mean?

Our intent has been to interpret the management identity, not as predominantly oppositional or negative as in the anti-identity depiction, but as a default identity. As organisational demands, challenges and expectations are encountered; this default identity is reverted to readily, easily and frequently, almost as if executives are “hard-wired” to respond in this way. We argue this default back to management has implications for the increasingly widespread development of leadership thinking and practice.

Recent identity research on leadership has proposed that managers very readily claim the leadership mantle, engage in leadership talk, and frame their position, role, and identity in explicitly leadership terms.<sup>12</sup> Currently this fashionable leadership identity confers more esteem, status and significance than a management one. It is scarcely surprising then, that executives are quick to identify with the former, despite it lacking substance and rationale. Our research draws attention to the role the management identity plays in leadership’s disappearance and has the potential to offer new insights and energy to the leadership concept, to leadership development, and to executives committed to growing their leadership capability and impact.

It is important not to interpret the concept of default in purely negative terms. A default position after all, offers a fall back position and an automatic “cover” that could be considered vital as one experiments and practices with more emergent approaches. One executive’s metaphor of management as “almost comfort food” is indicative of the warmth and security that a default identity can confer.

## Leadership talk, management walk

Defaulting to a comparatively familiar identity and set of practices is not problematic if it is done with intentionality and consciousness. On the other hand, a default position is likely to

be a problem if one gravitates there too readily, automatically and unconsciously. It would appear that many executives are caught in exactly this predicament, where they champion a leadership discourse without moving away from a management point of reference.

The real danger of the default identity is staying in that mode when faced with a leadership moment that needs more than a management response. Executives need vigilance, initiative, motivation and powerful intentionality if they are to avoid being stranded in the default or “hard-wired” position. The more emergent leadership identity needs to be moved to in a very deliberate way when leadership moments and challenges present themselves.

There is a relative failure of leadership research to provide adequate assistance in framing and interpreting the relationship between management and leadership in ways that are both nuanced and practical for those required to practice both.<sup>13</sup> Given, as we propose, that management is the default or “hard-wired” option, then it follows that any leadership orientation, action or response is one that has to be chosen repeatedly and by design. It is important to understand that leadership is not a romantic notion. Rather it is essential and very real, requiring “rolled up sleeves”, discipline, determination and hard work.

It is for valid reasons that the leadership approach has been described as countercultural, counterintuitive and potentially fraught.<sup>14</sup> While the leadership identity and rhetoric are attractive and desirable, the reality of being a leader, or being engaged in leadership, appears difficult to sustain. If indeed we do want more and better leadership, then executives need more help in conceptualising, assessing and crafting a more versatile range of management and leadership responses and practices.

## Framing and reframing

The practice with a capacity to replace the “hard-wired” default mechanism (management) with a more intentional and conscious choice (leadership) would seem to be apperception.<sup>15</sup>

Apperception is the ability to frame and reframe situations or alternatively relate new experiences to previous experiences. While apperception has been described in the context of distinguishing knowledge, skills and wisdom, we would see it as the pivotal learning in the movement from managing to leading (and back again) that should facilitate identification, competency and fluidity within both domains. Apperception relies on a development model built on reflection and experience, which if harnessed together would recognise and break patterns. If we accept that management is often a likely and automatic default option, then it follows that leadership only becomes possible with the acquisition of practices and processes that disrupt and re-route this tendency to be “hard-wired”.

This construction and analysis of management as being in a default relationship with leadership tempers the opposition and negativity of the two in identity research. Such research has been consistently pessimistic about leadership and its potential to effect real change and even difference in organisations. When management and leadership are viewed as connected and associated identities, this pessimism in our view seems to be entirely unwarranted.

## Listen to the voice in your head

The executives in this research inquiry were eager to acquire the leadership mantle but unable to make sense of it in isolation from

their partially unwanted but comfortable management identity. Their identification of leadership as intangible, and nebulous compared with the specificity and pragmatism with which they depicted management, suggests a relationship between the two that is more complex and nuanced than straightforward negativity or opposition. The inability of executives to define and delineate leadership and their composure about not doing so, suggests their complicity in protecting and safeguarding such a space, even though they may not (yet) be able to translate it into practice.

Our research asserts that attention should be given to those previous, prior, existing and even devalued identities (management) as potentially powerful links to new emergent identity possibilities (leadership).

So when you think you are doing leadership, how do you know that you haven't unknowingly defaulted to management? What is your check? What is the internal conversation that tells you to “rewire?”

As you think this through, listen to the words of the one of the executives in our study: “...you have to have enough trust in other people that you actually don't micro-manage them. That you step away enough to say ‘no, I actually don't have to worry about that’. I think there is always a danger that you will micro-manage and I am just as prone to that as anybody. It is so easy to get sucked into the detail, which has lots and lots of tentacles.” ■

“Aspiring to Lead: Hardwired to Manage” is published in the University of Auckland Business Review with the kind permission of Sage, the publishers of the prestigious international academic journal *Organization*. The original article “Defaulting to Management: Leadership Defined by What It Is Not” authored by Brigid Carroll and Lester Levy was first published in *Organization* 2008 (15):1. This article is a summary translation of the original article and is specifically intended for leadership practitioners to increase their engagement in the applied value of academic research.

## References

- Zaleznik, A. (1977). Managers and leaders: Are they different? *Harvard Business Review*. May-June.
- Kotter, J.P. (1990). What do leaders really do? *Harvard Business Review*. 68, 103-111.
- Yukl, G and Lepsinger, R. (2005). Why integrating the leading and managing roles is essential for organisational effectiveness. *Organisational Dynamics*. 34(4), 361-375.
- Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Harvard: Belknap.
- Grint, K. (2005) *Leadership: limits and possibilities*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Alvesson, M., Ashcraft, K.L., & Thomas, R. (2008). Identity Matters: Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in *Organization Studies*. *Organization*. 15(1), 5-28
- Alvesson, M. & Sveningsson, S. (2003a). Good visions, bad micro-management and ugly ambiguity: contradictions of (non-) leadership in a knowledge-intensive organization. *Organization Studies*. 24(6), 961-988.
- Sveningsson, S. & Larsson M. (2006). Fantasies of leadership: Identity work. *Leadership*. 2(2) 203-224.
- Alvesson, M. & Sveningsson, S. (2003a). Good visions, bad micro-management and ugly ambiguity: contradictions of (non-) leadership in a knowledge-intensive organization. *Organization Studies*. 24(6), 961-988.
- Alvesson, M & Sveningsson S. (2003b). Managers doing leadership: The extra-ordinarization of the mundane. *Human Relations*. 56(12), 1435-1459.
- Sveningsson, S. & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations*. 56(10), 1163-1193.; Sveningsson, S. & Larsson M. (2006). *See endnote 8*.
- Alvesson, M. & Willmott, H. (2002). Producing the appropriate individual: Identity regulation as organizational control. *Journal of Management Studies*. 39(5), 619-44.
- Sinclair, A. (2007). *Leadership for the disillusioned*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Heifetz, R. (1994). *See endnote 4*.
- Grint, K. (2005). *See endnote 5*.