Dressing Up Naked Leadership

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Abstract: This paper is a commentary on C. Richard Panico’s article “Naked Leadership: Lead to Win Hearts and Minds.” The relationship between academic and practitioner literature on leadership is symbiotic. Both approaches have their limitations. Academic theories may be impractical and practitioner’s ideas are sometimes anecdotal and highly contextual. Yet, as the paper demonstrates, the two literatures can overlap in interesting ways.

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In C. Richard Panico’s article “Naked Leadership: Lead to Win Hearts and Minds,” Panico argues that leaders must be willing to invest themselves and become “naked” to the organization. In this paper, I will “dress up” some of the ideas in Panico’s paper by discussing of some of the academic research and issues related to his ideas. The relationship between academic and practitioner literature on leadership is symbiotic. In leadership studies, most researchers either use surveys to test their theories in business organizations or they try out their ideas in laboratory settings on college students. The popular literature on leadership usually comes from practitioners like Panico who develop their ideas from personal and professional experiences. This literature often takes on an inspirational and hortatory tone. Both approaches have their limitations. Academic theories may be impractical and practitioner’s ideas are sometimes anecdotal and highly contextual. Yet, as we will see, the two literatures can overlap in interesting ways.

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Agency and Responsibility

Panico says that naked leaders “live and broadcast their values” in words and deeds and they “insist that their core values govern the conduct of the entire organization.” He notes that leaders are responsible for the culture of their organizations whether the culture developed by design or by default. But how responsible are leaders for what goes on in their organizations? Everything that goes on in an organization—be it good or bad—is usually attributed to the leader. Corporate CEOs do not have the luxury of saying: ‘it is not my fault’ when oil gushes into the Gulf of Mexico, or ‘I didn’t know about it’ when a rogue trader breaks the law, or ‘I wasn’t flying the plane’ when it crashes.

Many years ago, there was a spirited philosophic discussion in business ethics about the moral agency of corporations. Some philosophers argued that organizational conduct in business could not conform to ordinary principles of morality (Ladd 1970). Others such as Kenneth Goodpaster and John Matthews Jr. argued that corporations were morally responsible in the same way that people are (Goodpaster and Matthews 1982). Goodpaster and Matthews Jr. described three notions of responsibility: first, accountability or having someone to blame, second, rule following or doing what needs to be done, and third, the expectation that the agent is reliable and can be trusted. Since leaders are people, it appears easy to see how these principles apply—but let us look again. The first one is problematic because we normally do not blame people for things that they were not aware of, did not do, nor never intended to do. The second also has problems. Do we blame a person for not doing something in her organization if she did not know that it needed to be done? Lastly, like everyone else, leaders are called responsible if they are reliable and trustworthy, but unlike everyone else, they can be personally reliable and trustworthy and still be considered irresponsible because others around them are not.

My point here is that in regard to responsibility, ordinary notions of agency do not always apply to leaders. Their job is to take responsibly for everything that goes on in their organizations. Yet, how is taking responsibility for an organization or culture as a whole related to being responsible for all the things that people do in the organization? Leaders are designated agents, even if they are not always actual agents. A leader’s values may write the script of the organization but leaders do not play all of the parts in it. There are a number of philosophic questions surrounding this issue that I will not pursue here. Suffice to say, a morally distinctive
thing about the role leaders play is that unlike everyone else, they are sometimes expected to take credit and blame for things that they do not do.

**Naked and Romantic**

While Panico’s naked leader sounds like an admirable character, how much does she actually influence the organization? Another reason why we hold leaders responsible for the fate of organizations stems from the way that the media, and academic and popular literature in America socially constructs the idea of a leader. Articles like Panico’s draw a heroic picture of a strong, sensitive, and virtuous leader. In their classic article, “The Romance of Leadership” James Meindl and his colleagues call this the “romance of leadership.” They describe it this way:

> One of the principal elements in this romanticized conception is the view that leadership is a central organizational process and the premier force in the scheme of organizational events and activities. It amounts to what might be considered a faith in the potential if not in the actual efficacy of those individuals who occupy the elite positions of formal organizational authority. (Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich 1985)

Meindl et al. (and numerous subsequent studies), examine how the media and academics portray leaders. They found that both groups attribute to leaders larger than life abilities to influence the fortunes of organizations. This was especially true with very successful or very unsuccessful organizations. People like the heroic idea of a leader because it supplies an easy way to make sense of what goes on in complex organizations. If a company fails, it is much easier to blame the leader than other factors.

Meindl et al. note that it can be dysfunctional for employees to hold a romanticized view of their leader’s ability to foresee events and control outcomes, because they may not address organizational problems or take responsibility for their own shortcomings. However, Meindl et al. suggest that it may be healthy for leaders to hold an excessive belief in the potency of their leadership. First, because leaders can and often do make a difference. And second, because it helps leaders convey a sense of efficacy and control. As long as leaders do not become delusional about their abilities, a heroic self-perception also reinforces their sense of moral responsibility for the organization. Perhaps this explains why business leaders like Panico tend to overemphasize a leader’s influence on an organization and highlight the importance of a leader’s moral values. The motivational aspect
of some leadership literature may actually serve a useful purpose and, as Panico observes, there are a lot of leaders out there who need to be more responsible.

**Perceptions and Traits**

Panico disagrees with the idea that perceptions about leaders are reality. This is generally true in the examples that he gives about phony and hypocritical leaders who fool their followers. Yet followers’ perceptions are not always fair to leaders. Panico tells us that leaders sometimes have to overcome the negative “brand” of their predecessor. We all possess ideas about what a leader should be like or an “implicit theory of leadership.” Panico’s naked leader fits some people’s idea of what a leader should be. However, his description may not conform to others culturally endorsed implicit theory (House, Javidan, Hanges, and Dorfman 2002). This means that culture writ large and small shapes perceptions of what a leader is and should be.

Panico gives the naked leader traits that mix moral qualities such as “uncompromising honesty and integrity” and “treat everyone with respect and dignity” with affective traits such as “they love to interact and communicate” and “are comfortable expressing emotions and displaying vulnerability.” Not all leaders in all industries love to interact and communicate, and displaying emotions and vulnerability might be a disaster for leaders in some contexts. Neither academics nor practitioners can resist the temptation to make a list of leader traits and then come up with names for leaders who have those traits. But as Bass and Steidlmier conclude, leadership research has yet to uncover a comprehensive set of traits that constitute a good leader (Bass 1990). Leaders also do not appear to be born. Studies do not show a clear dominance of particular innate personality traits in leaders. Bono, et al. did an analysis of how the Big 5 personality traits—neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—influenced leader emergence and effectiveness in other studies. They found that a quality like extroversion is important in leader emergence but not as important as conscientiousness in leader effectiveness (Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt, M. 2002). The combination of traits that make good leaders depends quite a bit on the context.

**Naked and Authentic**

Panico says naked leaders are authentic. This resonates with the popular and academic literature about authentic leadership. Bill George, the former CEO of Medtronic, wrote a best selling book on authentic leadership that emphasizes some
of the same characteristics as Panico’s naked leader (George 2003). Researchers
describe authentic leadership in a variety of ways (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, and
Dickens 2011). Some describe it as—“a process that draws from both positive psy-
chological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results
in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of
leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development” (Luthans and Avolio
2003, 243). Authentic leadership is basically about how a leader’s self-knowledge
contributes to making him or her an effective and a moral leader. There are many
problems with the theory of authentic leadership, one of which is that the idea that
“just being yourself” results in good leadership really depends on what that self is
like. To this we might add that not every leader looks good “naked.”

Trust
Panico’s essay is leader-centric in that focuses on establishing a leadership “brand”
and a leader who has certain moral and personal qualities necessary to develop a
great organizational culture. Panico does not talk much about followers except
when he makes a key point in his essay about trust. He says naked leaders “extend
trust to earn trust and loyalty.” Academics and practitioners often only focus on
how leaders get trust not on how they give trust (Solomon 2004). It would have
been nice if Panico explicitly made the same point about loyalty—you have to
extend loyalty to earn loyalty—because loyalty is also reciprocal. Why would fol-
lowers be loyal to a leader who was not loyal to them? To be fair, elements of
leader loyalty are implied in some of the features of Panico’s great culture such as
“heartfelt obligation for other’s well-being.”

As I said in the beginning there are may ways in which individual and
academic reflections on leadership overlap with each other and it would be dis-
concerting if they did not. Whether leaders are called “naked” or “authentic” does
not matter as much as the fact that researchers and business leaders like Panico
recognize the role of ethics in effective leadership. Leadership is not about leaders.
It is about a two-way relationship that is and ought to be about “doing things with
people, rather than to people” (Hollander 2009, 3).

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