

ACADEMICS

The Leadership System

Barbara Kellerman, Harvard University

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind giving a bit of a background about how you found yourself in the field of leadership?

Kellerman: I remember, even as a little girl, being interested in how some children seemed always to get what they wanted and when they wanted it – and other children did not. We did not certainly use the word leader, but always there were those who ended on top. I remember even back then being interested in the phenomenon. As well, I grew up in a very politically oriented home, and regularly there were conversations about outstanding leaders. So, certainly parental influence also played a role. As far as making a profession out of leadership, I became interested in the subject in graduate school. My dissertation was about the important German Chancellor, Willy Brandt – who by the way, I was able to interview while on a Fulbright in Germany - and was titled, “Willy Brandt: Portrait of the Leader as a Young Politician.”

But when I got my Ph.D. and wanted to go into academia, there were no jobs for faculty interested in leadership per se. By the way...there still aren't many. But there were plenty of jobs for faculty who, for example, taught the American Presidency or the U.S. Congress. So, that is exactly what I did. I was able to get into academia by knowing somewhat more about the Presidency and Congress than did my students! Only in the fullness of time, was I able to transition to that which I had cared about all along which, is leadership and, later, followership. They really had been my lifelong interest, which I had to fit into making a living until a job opened that was close enough to home and that specifically was in the field of leadership, or leadership studies. The first real leadership job I had was at the Institute of Leadership Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University. It was a graduate program that awarded an Ed.D. Since then, I have been able to stay professionally involved in the field of leadership.

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Lindsay: As a field of study, how are we doing?

Kellerman: Anyone who has read my blogs, articles, or books on leadership, especially recent ones such as *The End of Leadership*¹ and *Professionalizing Leadership*², knows that I have begun freely to write about, and speak about, my disappointment in how the field of leadership studies has evolved. I refer to it – the whole leadership enterprise – as the “leadership industry.” This industry – which started small about fifty years ago – has become an enormous moneymaking machine. In this it is successful. But it is not – the field of leadership, leadership as an area of intellectual inquiry—as rich, as evolved, as interesting or stimulating as it could be and should be. Neither practically nor pedagogically. I wrote about this at some length in *Professionalizing Leadership*. I do feel that leadership learning is incredibly inferior to learning any other profession or even vocation. It astonishes me that higher education – undergraduate institutions and graduate ones – does not take more note of this. In part on account of the academy’s³ laxness and inattention, it does not really surprise me that leaders, across the board, are far less respected and less trusted than they used to be. And leaders behave more badly than they used to – again in part because we who are in the field of leadership studies, we who are experts, seem ourselves to disrespect the field. One more point – my research suggests that as an institution the military generally, is the exception to this rule. I go into this in more detail in *Professionalizing Leadership*. The point is the military sector – in comparison with the civilian one – generally takes leadership seriously and comes far closer than the civilian sector to professionalizing the process of learning how to lead.

Lindsay: With that notion of taking the leadership

1 Kellerman, B. (2012). *The End of Leadership*. New York, NY: Harper Business.

2 Kellerman, B. (2018). *Professionalizing Leadership*. Oxford University Press.

3 Refers to the larger academic community.

industry to task, how has that resonated with those in the field of leadership be it business, consulting, academic, etc.?

Kellerman: It is an interesting question and one that is hard to respond to precisely. I do not feel that my argument has made an enormous impression or that I have had an enormous impact. On the contrary, I feel that I have had relatively little impact. Having said this, it is also the case that there are absolutely some people, in both the private and public sectors, who are willing to say out loud that they resonate with my concerns and complaints. And, indeed, to act on them! So I haven’t been ostracized – people are still talking to me. This said, I cannot say that I think that the majority of my colleagues, in the academy especially, hears me – or maybe wants to hear me. As in any profession, or line of work, there are vested interests. Deviating from these interests, and from past patterns of behavior, is a difficult thing to get people to do. Especially when there is no one in a position of authority to tell them to do it.

It is impossible to look at the overwhelming majority of leadership programs – again, exempting the military – and conclude that we are doing as good a job of teaching leaders, teaching leadership, teaching people how to lead than we could be. It’s screamingly obvious that electricians and plumbers get more of a proper education – education befitting a vocation, not to speak of a profession, than do leaders. It should not surprise us then that we get leaders – sometimes even Presidents of the United States – who have zero expertise or experience that is relevant. We see this often in politics, where we seem to have scant compunction about electing or appointing people who are complete novices. But of course we would never in a million years bring into our homes – as I implied a few moments ago – a plumber or an electrician who is similarly demonstrably unqualified. Why we are willing to settle for obviously unqualified leaders remains to me an absolute mystery.

Lindsay: It seems like what you are suggesting is it not like we don't have the ability to, it's that we are not. Am I hearing that right?

Kellerman: I think you are. I'm not saying that, for example, the military is perfect. It teaches how to lead as I, ideally, think it ought to be done. But the military not only teaches leadership early on, specifically, most obviously, at the military academies, but the military also takes leadership seriously lifelong – throughout people's military careers. Cadets who go to the various military academies get a real leadership education. For example, in the liberal arts, they are obliged to take relevant courses in, say, subjects such as history, psychology, political science, and philosophy. And, as indicated, the military continues to take leadership learning seriously, throughout a person's career. Leadership is talked about, practiced, focused on with laser-like intensity and consistency.

This is what I mean when I speak about leadership *development* – as opposed to leadership education and training. Moreover, the military has a moral code, which I consider essential to professionalizing leadership. This, by the way, is analogous to medicine and law, which both have moral codes to which professionals are supposed to adhere. Professions typically have a moral code in addition to a body of learning that is considered essential to the field. But in the field of leadership, no matter how highly ranked the institution, places such as, for example, Harvard and Stanford, there is nothing even vaguely resembling what the military has. Again, it's not that the military academies are perfect. But, they are good. They take leadership – leadership theory and leadership practice – seriously. Obviously, I consider the idea that leadership can be taught swiftly and easily ridiculous.

Lindsay: That's interesting because if you look at it from a value proposition case, having effective leaders is good for the organization. Therefore, leader development interventions should be intentional and

be assessed for their efficacy. However, they often are not. Why is there a disconnect between what we know about leadership and what organizations do with respect to developing leaders?

Kellerman: If you survey leaders in the private sector, since your question was primarily about the private sector, they register a high level of dissatisfaction with the leadership programs that do exist – there is plenty of data to support that. It's not as if people are satisfied with the leadership learning that does take place, which makes your question the more relevant. If people are not satisfied, why don't they do something different? In ancient time, the times, say, of Plato and Confucius, people seemed to understand that learning to lead was a lifelong enterprise and, at that, a deeply serious one. But for some reason – mostly money, I suspect – when the leadership industry emerged relatively recently, it was assumed by the private sector, with higher education every bit its match, that learning how to lead was easy, could be accomplished quickly, sometimes even on the job. In other words, neither the private sector, nor higher education, has been willing to dedicate to learning how to lead the necessary human and fiscal resources that would be required to do so wisely and well.

Medical and law schools – and most vocational schools – do take their responsibilities seriously. They credential and license people, and individuals must pass certain tests before they can practice their profession, or vocation. For some reason, all these escape leadership educators in higher education, and in the private sector, and in the public sector. They – leadership teachers and leadership learners – seem not to understand that leadership needs to be taught seriously and in a way, yes, that requires a significant investment of time and money, on everyone's part. For example, Harvard or Stanford Universities could easily develop a serious leadership curriculum. During their last two years of college, undergraduates would concentrate on Leadership Studies – take liberal arts

and social science courses directly related to leadership. Then they would go to a professional school such as a business school or a school of government or a school of education. This would amount to a four-year curriculum in leadership education and training. This would signal that leadership is to be taken seriously, as is any other profession, in which both education and training are the lynchpins.

Lindsay: That truth that leadership can be learned is an important one. There is still a surprisingly large number of people who believe leadership is something that is inherent within an individual that it is something that you are born with. The reality is that it is a combination of both and not either or.

We cannot make everyone a great leader but we can make leaders far, far better equipped to lead than we do now.

Kellerman: I would compare learning to lead to learning to play the piano or to learning any other skill. Is it possible for me to be a great piano player? Absolutely not. I simply don't have the innate talent. That's analogous to leadership. There are some people who are just gifted at leading and some who are less so. Just as there are some people that are just naturally gifted at playing the piano. If I took piano lessons for years at a time, would I learn to become a reasonably good piano player? Absolutely. But, again, would I learn to be a great piano player? Not in a million years. This dichotomy, then, between leaders being born or made is absurd. Are piano players born or made? Education and training make better leaders and better piano players. But they do not make *great* anything.

Here's a question: what can be learned from a good leadership education? I now teach about what I call the leadership *system*. This system consists of three

parts: leaders, followers, and contexts. As you might know, I've written quite extensively about the leadership system. It is not just about leaders. It is the opposite of leader centric. The leadership system is equally about followers – and about the contexts. Can we teach leaders to be aware of their followers, how to interact with their followers, to be aware of the context, to know what to look for, to be contextually intelligent and aware? Absolutely. This is work that we can do. We cannot make everyone a great leader but we can make leaders far, far better equipped to lead than we do now.

Lindsay: That's an interesting shift in the mental model about leadership of just trying to make everyone a great leader. If we would stop the bad leaders from enacting their bad behavior and help all levels improve, we would see vast improvements by bringing the bottom up. To your point about the military, that is what we try to do in terms of trying to eliminate

the bottom end by getting everyone where they are at least good at leadership versus just focusing on the top several people.

Kellerman: I think that is a really good way of looking at it.⁴ I'm very interested in bad leadership and some years ago I wrote a book about it. I do think that, as you are suggesting, they go together. What we are talking about is increasing the number of good leaders and, of course, one way of doing that is by reducing the number of bad leaders. Bad leadership, though related to good leadership, obviously, is a whole other subject. One that is, sadly, almost entirely ignored by the contemporary leadership industry. Bad leadership is a reason I became interested in followership. How do people who are powerless get rid of people who are powerful, if the latter are performing badly

⁴ Kellerman, B. (2004). *Bad Leadership: What it is, How it Happens, Why it Matters*. Harvard Business Press.

either because they are ineffective or because they are unethical, or sometimes both? It is a complicated issue, but certainly the way you framed it is absolutely one way of looking at it.

Lindsay: With that idea of bad leaders and their impact on followers in mind, what advice do you have for followers who may be stuck in a situation where they are needing to lead up due to having a bad leader?

Kellerman: As with most things that are leader-related, any advice to be offered depends on the specifics: on who is the leader, on who are the followers, and on what is the situation. Therefore, the best answer to your question is, it depends. How to deal with bad leadership depends upon the variables to which I just alluded. In general, though, don't try to get rid of a bad leader all on your own. In almost all cases you have a whistle blower, which is really what that amounts to. Being a whistle blower, for example, a follower who goes against the powers that be, usually by him or herself, is risky business. There is a small literature on whistle blowing, and invariably it's full of cautions. This is not to say that no one should blow the whistle. It's great to have some Davids going up against some Goliaths. Some followers going up against some leaders who are in some way "superior" to them, that is, more powerful or having more authority. But, again, it can be and usually is, risky personally, risky professionally, risky politically and sometimes, even risky legally. People have to be careful, to an extent self-protective. Ira Chaleff, a colleague, would call a whistle blower a courageous follower. Which is great – it's great to be a courageous follower. But one has simultaneously be a strategic follower. Most of us are not masochists. We don't want to sacrifice ourselves on the altar of followership. So, being a strategic or a clever follower is just as important as being a courageous follower. If you find yourself stuck in a situation in which bad leadership is rampant, evident, my best single piece of advice is to try hard not to go it alone.

Lindsay: I was hoping that you would bring up the idea of the system of leadership and the value of the context. Those are important distinctions. I think a lot of people approach it from the standpoint of, if I just do X or Y as a leader, then I will be good as a leader, regardless of where I am at. We see some leaders who have been successful in one domain, try to transition to another domain and they forget that they are walking into a different context. They mistakenly think that what made them successful in one domain automatically allows them to be successful in a different domain. If you don't realize the value of context, you will have some very predictable negative results.

Kellerman: I think it is correct to say that there are absolutely leaders who are splendid in one context and then, in another context, they are much less splendid. Sometimes even, in some cases, downright bad. It's equally true that there are leaders who are good in one context, and then in another context they are just as good. However, this does not for one second diminish the importance of being contextually conscious. I cannot tell you how curious I find it, and how unfortunate, that in general leadership experts ignore the significance of context. Context matters. It is directly relevant to leadership. Therefore, when someone is learning how to lead, they should be learning, as an integral part of the process, how to be contextually conscious – that is, contextually aware, contextually expert, and contextually intelligent. It's my contention that in teaching people how to lead, one of the mistakes we make is focusing far too much on them – on their level of self-awareness, on their authenticity, on their skill set and so on – and far too little on the other, the follower, and equally far too little on the context.

Lindsay: How does this importance of the value of the context affect your approach to leadership and how you teach, coach, and develop leaders?

Kellerman: I'll make two comments. Since the inception of the leadership industry, the world has changed. Things change, they always change. I write about this all the time. For example, the culture has changed and technologies have changed. Technology is not, per se, about leadership or followership. Rather it is about a change in the context. But, again, how can we teach leadership without teaching the impact that social media has had on the relationship between, the dynamic between, leaders and followers? To me, such an omission is a mystery. My students, by the way, and my various audiences, all get it. They get that understanding leadership and followership in the 21st century without understanding the role of social media is not possible. The same holds for culture. Cultural changes explain the decline in respect for authority which, in turn, explains a lot about leadership at this moment in time, in liberal democracies and, I hasten to add, autocracies.

I fold many of these ideas into the course that I now teach at the Harvard Kennedy School, titled, *Leadership System: Leaders, Followers, Contexts*. I have, according to my students, zero trouble convincing them that followers matter, and that contexts matter. I want to take just a moment to focus on followership. When I say that there have been changes of great consequence in the last half century, what I am saying is that the context has changed, and that followers have also changed. These are independent - and they are interdependent. I would say the same things about followers that I just did about context. To teach leadership, to teach leaders, in any way, shape, or form, without paying even the slightest attention to followership, to followers, strikes me as absurd. Pay attention people! Open your eyes to what goes on in the world and you will see that it is not just about leaders and leadership anymore. The world has changed - irrevocably. And it will continue to do so.

Lindsay: As I hear you talk about that, it seems like on the applied and academic sides of leadership studies, we see a great proliferation of the different "types" of leaders. Servant leaders, authentic leaders, etc., and a focus on the individual aspects of the leader. To your point, we don't see a concurrent systems view of leadership study. We see a little bit on the negative side of things with explanations like the Toxic Triangle that addresses destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments from Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser⁵, but little else from a systems perspective.

Kellerman: Institutions and organizations that should be on the cutting edge of leadership education, training, and development have, alas, changed rather little in the last 20 to 30 years. So, we are stuck in a situation in which the pedagogy is behind the times, far behind. By the way, I suspect that one of the reasons why people are reluctant to tackle this, to take on leadership learning in a big way, is that it is complicated. It simply can't be done without a considerable investment of time and other resources. Moreover, to do it right would take a depth of understanding of the world in which we operate. For example, the levels of fractionalization in this country, the levels of unhappiness with the leadership class, the divisiveness, anger, and disappointment - all these are relevant to what we are talking about. Simply because the level of investment, as I have said, is so great that it is daunting, which means people are loathe to, or at least, reluctant to, address it. Moreover, there are always personal and professional politics involved. The academy, by the way, is hardly immune from the competitiveness and turf-consciousness to which I allude. They make real reform, genuine rethinking about something as fundamental as a leadership curriculum, difficult. Additionally, there are the professional organizations, which equally have not shown themselves equipped or inclined to

⁵ Padilla, A., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. (2007). The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(3), 176-194.

take on the issues to which I refer in any meaningful, in any impactful, way. So far any way, they too have lacked the dedication, seriousness, and clarity of purpose that in my view would be necessary to create meaningful change.

Lindsay: From a practitioner or consulting standpoint, when you look at the fact that over \$40+ Billion dollars is spent annually on leader development just within the United States, there is money that people spend but it seems as if it is doled out to various programs to check a box so that it can be said that something is being done regarding development. So, the money is out there, but it seems as if it is being done in a more tactical way instead of what you are suggesting in a more strategic way.

Kellerman: I think that is a good way of putting it. I think that distinction between tactics and strategy is a good one and it frames what I am getting at. Tactics are short term solutions, whereas in this case certainly strategy generally implies a long-term perspective, in this case trying to figure out how to get from where we are now, at point A, to where I would want us to go, point B. Point B is taking leadership learning seriously and professionalizing it accordingly.

Lindsay: That might explain why we see a shortage of valid leader assessment and why we see simplistic approaches to assessment like the reaction criteria of, “How did you like the program?”

Kellerman: Exactly. I did want to go back though and say a bit more about professional associations. Look at the professions and the way they developed over time – all of which was tied to the notion of professionalism – and you will see the role played by professional associations such as, in the United States, the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association. These professional associations then furthered the idea that medicine and law respectively,

were professions to be taken seriously. That’s how, over time, standards were set not only for education, but also for credentialing and licensing. That’s why in this day and age it generally no longer suffices simply get your MD and then to be an intern and resident. Now you are generally expected also to continue your education lifelong. Understandably, because you can’t be credentialled as a surgeon in 2019 without knowing full well that five or 10 years from now, surgery, the science of surgery, the techniques of surgery, will be very different. So, you are expected to engage in educational experiences lifelong. Or, at least as long as you practice your profession.

It should be the same with leaders. Ideally, there should be a professional association for leaders that takes some of this on fully and responsibly. That, among other things, fosters conversations about licensing and credentialing leaders and, to use your word, about assessing leaders. The lack of a professional association and the inability of leadership experts to collaborate even to a moderately sufficient degree, whether it be academics, practitioners, coaches or consultants, has been a severe liability for those of us who have an interest not only in furthering the field, but in growing better leaders.

Lindsay: With the idea of a professional organization that could start to sort out some of those standards, requirements, and lifelong learning, where could that start? If we notice that there is a gap, and we see other professional organizations making progress in understanding their profession and moving it forward, what would be the first steps in making that happen?

Kellerman: I’ve been involved in this to some degree. Less so in recent years, but some time back I was very involved in just the question that you are raising. I ultimately found that the politics and personalities were just not conducive to doing the work. In the intervening years, it is not my experience that any single organization is currently suited or constituted to

do the necessary heavy lifting. It is not that there are no organizations out there that are doing some good work. That is not what I am saying. Rather it is that the work that would be required to raise the standards of leadership education, development, and training is extensive – and none of these organizations as they are now led and constituted, is in my view properly equipped, however equipped is defined, to undertake the task. By the way, I have written about the different

somewhat frustrated by the lack of progress. Moreover, I suspect that if, magically, he reappeared on the scene, he would not exactly be heartened by what he saw.

Lindsay: With all of this information that we have talked about, what advice would you have for new leaders in terms of what they should be thinking about or work on as they begin their professions?

Getting a leadership education is one process, being trained as a leader is another process, and being developed as a leader is a third process.

verbs that are used in this general regard - education, training, and development. They are all important, but they are not one and the same. Though they generally are used interchangeably, even synonymously, they refer to very different things. Getting a leadership education is one process, being trained as a leader is another process, and being developed as a leader is a third process. These processes are all important – it does each a disservice to not clearly and consistently distinguish among them.

Lindsay: Unfortunately, it sounds like until we start to think about what that looks like, we will be stuck in this cycle of the introduction of new theories and new programs without much progress on moving forward as a profession.

Kellerman: One of the leading lights behind leadership studies as contemporaneously conceived was James MacGregor Burns. He was not only an eminent scholar, he was also an activist. Among his various endeavors, he tried mightily in the 1970s and '80s to do some of the work that we're now talking about – including becoming involved with some of the organizations dedicated to these issues. He has since passed away but as the years went on he became

Kellerman: To young people I would say first say get yourself a good liberal arts education – and only then move on to leadership education and training in the area within which you intend to locate yourself. To more mature

leaders, or would-be leaders, I would say don't just think in terms of your own personal and professional self, think also outside the box, outside your box. Think about leadership as a system – which means thinking in addition to yourself thinking about everyone else, and about the various, multiple, contexts within which all of you are situated.

Lindsay: So, what is next on the horizon for you?

Kellerman: I am co-authoring a book titled, *Leaders Who Lust: Power, Money, Sex, Success, Legitimacy, and Legacy*. It will be published by Cambridge University Press during the first half of 2020.