

BOOKS & ARTS

The makings of great leaders

Leadership, **Michael Bond** learns from two new books, is not about getting people to do things, it is about getting them to want to do things — and it emerged on the African plains.

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists,” surmised the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu. Yet no modern prime minister or president would run things from the back room. Today’s figureheads are lauded for having quirks of character that set them apart from the crowd — such as the superior charisma and intelligence of Winston Churchill or Abraham Lincoln.

Our obsession with the personalities of great leaders is out of kilter with the scientific basis of social hierarchies, according to two books. In *The New Psychology of Leadership*, psychologists Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher and Michael Platow propose that successful stewardship owes more to the good relationship between a leader and his or her followers than to an individual’s character. In *Selected*, psychologist Mark van Vugt and journalist Anjana Ahuja take an evolutionary approach, suggesting that leadership emerged to aid the survival of small communities on the African plains.

Haslam, Reicher and Platow are known for their work on social identity and group dynamics. They maintain that effective leadership is about winning the hearts and minds of others rather than about good decision-making or management. “It is not about getting people to do things. It is about getting them to want to do things,” they remark. The authors cite laboratory studies, including their own, which show that members who embody and promote a group’s shared values are more likely to emerge as spokespeople. Leaders must be seen to be both typical of their group and acting in its collective interests.

Influential leaders such as Churchill, Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and Sonia Gandhi worked hard to build this shared identity, which they enhanced using their rhetoric and creative skills. Even George W. Bush, ridiculed for his gaffes, was good at connecting with his supporters — winning over ordinary voters with his casual dress and plain speaking. The book’s



Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress Party, worked hard to mobilize grass-roots support.

examples are drawn mainly from politics, but the principle applies to others whose rank is socially derived, such as captains of sports teams, expedition leaders and army generals.

But why are there leaders at all? In *Selected*, Ahuja and van Vugt propose that among early humans, those who had the cognitive capacity

to follow others sought safety in numbers. At the same time, leaders made survival more likely for everyone by binding groups together and providing expertise — for example, on which foods could be safely eaten.

Rather than promoting an individual to rule in all eventualities, our early ancestors looked to dif-

ferent people to lead in varying circumstances. A group would follow one leader when hunting, another during war and a third during times of sickness. “If you were to meet a tribesman and ask him to ‘Take me to your leader,’ he would be bewildered by your request,” the authors note. This changed with the development of agriculture 13,000 years ago, which led to an increase in the size and complexity of societies.

Ahuja and van Vugt and argue that our

brains are still hard-wired for the savannah. Our psychology remains suited to the dynamics of small groups, not to the hierarchies of large populations that are common in the political systems and organizations of today. Leadership structures would do better to reflect the constraints of our evolutionary history, they suggest. This points to informal, decentralized systems that are limited to 150 members, a size at which people can know each other by name. The authors recommend that organizations avoid large pay gaps between leaders and followers, choose leaders from within and favour consensual decision-making. They also note the importance of deferring decisions to specialists when needed, and the implementation of checks and balances to ensure that a leader cannot coerce, exploit or dominate his or her followers.

Despotic leaders are a recent phenomenon, according to van Vugt and Ahuja.

They claim that the agricultural revolution unleashed “our primal tendency to dominate and exploit others”, as it allowed leaders to stockpile food and use it to exert control. This sounds plausible but is hard to verify — a common problem in the examples given in *Selected*, as anthropological studies and game theory can deliver no more than sketches of ancestral life. Yet the book’s practical suggestions are worth taking seriously.

The New Psychology of Leadership barely touches on this negative side of governance, beyond warning that leaders who think individual character is most important will believe that any success is due to them alone — and will consider themselves above the group. It is not clear whether all leaders might succumb to such arrogance. Nor do the authors ask to what ends leaders should put their power, other than helping the group to “create a social world in which [it] can live according to its values”. Yet much conflict is caused by leaders doing just this. This reflects a wider problem with the book: it is so focused on its theory of building social identity that it fails to explore the full implications of leadership.

A greater challenge would be to ask how leaders who have gained their followers’ confidence might use it to marry their group’s interests with those of others, as Nelson

The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power

By S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher and Michael J. Platow
Psychology Press: 2010. 304 pp. £45

Selected: Why Some People Lead, Why Others Follow, and Why It Matters

by Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja
Profile Books/HarperBusiness:
2010/2011. 272 pp. £12.99/\$26.99

Mandela managed to do in South Africa, and as Israeli and Palestinian leaders have so far failed to do. Haslam, Reicher and Platow suggest that such considerations are beyond psychology. But this undermines their hope that their approach to leadership might bring about a more democratic world.

Both *Selected* and *The New Psychology of Leadership* contain the ingredients for a more encouraging social model of leadership. They also bring a scientific approach to an important subject that has been without it for too long. ■ **Michael Bond** is a writer based in London and a *locum* Opinion editor for *Nature*.

Palestinians and Israelis talk water

Water Wisdom: Preparing the Groundwork for Cooperative and Sustainable Water Management in the Middle East

Edited by Alon Tal and Alfred Abed Rabbo
Rutgers University Press: 2010.
336 pp. \$29.95

Although the political dilemma that separates Israel and the Palestinian Authority has led to the construction of an impermeable border between them, the water crisis that threatens both nations can be resolved only by cooperation across that boundary. In *Water Wisdom*, a collection of essays edited by environmental scientists Alon Tal and Alfred Abed Rabbo, water-policy experts from the Middle East argue that a combination of technology, conservation and cooperation can ensure an adequate water supply to the region.

The land between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea has been dry since ancient times. Lacking a great river, farmers have long been dependent on winter rains, which periodically fail, and on wells that tap the aquifers lying below the limestone bedrock. Just before Israel won its independence

in the mid-twentieth century, that water had to slake the thirst, clean the homes and irrigate the fields of nearly 2 million people; today, the same resources serve a combined population of 12 million. In the past two decades, the winter rains have disappointed, the aquifers and surface reservoirs have been overpumped and pollution threatens the water that remains. And severe inequalities prevail in water distribution. The average Israeli uses 350 cubic metres of water a year; a Palestinian uses about 100 cubic metres.

Cautious optimism prevails in the pages of *Water Wisdom*. The authors — Palestinians and Israelis — cover topics from water resources and culture, through law and standards to reuse and desalination of waste water. Always professional and polite, they do not shy away from disagreement or abandon their cultural narratives. The book's Palestinian contributors tend to decry the inequities of allocations and power, and to assert that any solution must include the recognition of Palestinian rights to their own water resources. The Israeli writers point to the Palestinian Authority's failure to enforce agreements that limit water use or

to provide adequate infrastructure, despite generous international donations. For example, nearly one-third of Palestinian water is wasted because of leaky pipes.

All the authors agree that there is no real basis for what Hillel Shuval, one of Israel's leading water experts, has named "hydro-hysteria". Thanks to new technologies for waste water treatment, reuse and desalination, water is no longer a zero-sum game. A new desalination plant in Israel's southern coastal city of Ashqelon now supplies some 15% of Israel's annual domestic demand. Four other plants along the coast are in various states of construction and operation. And plans proceed apace for the Red Sea–Dead Sea canal, which will produce 850 million cubic metres of fresh water a year, mostly for Amman in neighbouring Jordan.

Such projects raise hopes that natural flows can be restored to the area's rivers — including the River Jordan, which today flows only because of the sewage flushed into it — and make it more likely that the aquifers and the area's only large freshwater resource, Lake Kinneret (known to many as the Sea of Galilee) can be saved from exhaustion. Yet the region's environmentalists, notably Friends of the Earth Middle East, point out that reuse and desalination come with their own environmental baggage — removing salt from seawater requires the burning of carbon and the disposal of waste, and highly treated sewage can change the chemistry of farmland.

The book examines the legacy of earlier water projects. New technology represents both danger and opportunity because it offers governments attractive short-term solutions while deferring long-term costs. Israel's leaders put their faith in technology 60 years ago when they embarked on the construction of the National Water Carrier to pipe water from Lake Kinneret to the country's arid south. This made the desert bloom but reduced the lower River Jordan to a trickle and led to the shrinkage of the Dead Sea, with myriad consequences. When the rains failed, it was easy to pump more water from Lake Kinneret, now at risk of becoming a puddle of brine.

The crisis is acute. Israelis and Palestinians need to find a way to manage their water together, even if a political resolution to their century-long dispute remains elusive. Technology will be an important part of that management, but it is not a magic wand. It is fortunate that both sides have at their service a coterie of knowledgeable and dedicated water professionals, among them the authors of this much-needed book. ■

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Industrial evaporation has shrunk the Dead Sea, creating sinkholes and rivers of hyper-saline water.

G. STEINMETZ/SPL