Special Issue Editorial: Navigating the liquid complexities of leadership

In an era of global political, economic and social instability; leadership, which can be defined as “mobilising, focusing and sustaining the energy and effort of people as they engage with goals and activities valued by organisations, groups and communities”¹, is proposed as a remedy for this upheaval. This Special Issue of the Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government set out to examine this theme and, in so doing, to provide new and up-to-date insights from the leadership discipline.

The collection of articles within this issue have certainly delivered on that brief reminding us that, despite the plethora of management texts on leadership, there are still many lessons to be learned as leadership research continues to evolve amid ever increasing complexity.

The authors of this collection of articles, while reminding us that there are many issues confronting today’s leaders, also point out that, in some cases, we are victims of circumstance but in others we tend to bring disaster or potential disaster upon ourselves. These articles are diverse and multidisciplinary, however, a number of consistent themes emerge in both the theoretical and practical insights provided. For example, Professor Nita Cherry’s “lessons from the street” highlights the complexity of the conditions under which leaders lead. This article considers the links between past and present theoretical perspectives on leadership practice and then invites us to share some of the complex dilemmas that face operational police and their leaders as they grapple at street level. A key question in Professor Cherry’s article is how to effectively prepare and support leaders to practice leadership under changing and complex conditions. Extracts from the transcripts of interviews conducted with serving Police in Melbourne, Australia show some of the complexities arising at the operational level. Professor Cherry also sees the need to recognise these complexities in leadership education to truly master leadership and this is consistent within a number of articles in this issue.

Professor Nejdet Delener continues the theme of complexity in his search for leadership excellence in higher education. Professor Delener also highlights leadership diversity but introduces us to a variety of other leadership challenges including competitive forces, emerging technology, the demands of multiple stakeholders and diminishing revenue – all under the gaze of a sceptical public that is becoming increasingly disillusioned with higher education. Like Professor Cherry, Professor Delener sees value in the wisdom emanating from the street rather than from direct management. A lack of preparation for leadership roles is explored in this article too and also resonates throughout this special issue. For those of us in the academic world, I’m sure that reading this article will provide many insights, especially into the leadership skills required by academic leaders. Professor Delener concludes that there is a need to revisit approaches to leadership in an era of limited resources and an urgent need to strategically deal with current threats and opportunities.

¹ Professor Nita Cherry: MBA class notes, Swinburne University of Technology.
Dr Julian Lippi, who contrasts the management literature with emerging educational theory, also recognises current leadership complexity as he describes the fluidity of the current leadership environment. Framed in Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity, Dr Lippi advocates the need for navigational aids to support today’s leaders suggesting a need to supplement the business school curriculum to deal with emerging leadership dilemmas. Dr Lippi’s article reminds us of the speed of change and the need to be constantly vigilant in a dynamic, networked environment that pays little attention to tradition and the glory of past behaviour. The need for networks and alliances is also underscored, as are notions of mutual trust and accountability. Dr Lippi offers hope, however, asserting that there are always new ways and opportunities to refresh one’s thinking about leadership.

Drs Ashfaq Khan and Wiqar Ahmad identify ethical leadership as the missing link in business schools and as the foremost cause of the current financial crisis. They demonstrate how unethical decisions, often made by graduates of renowned business schools, caused a failure of financial markets. In their conceptual article, they point out that the business school curriculum has failed to instil ethical behaviour in business graduates resulting in leaders that command power but fail to adhere to the responsibilities of their leadership roles. This is not new. Their review of other financial crises shows that a lack of ethics among leaders has caused many other financial crises. Moreover, those that were in a position to assist have often exacerbated the problem. As a result, Drs Khan and Ahmad see a need to inculcate ethics during the early years of development, namely within the primary and secondary school systems.

Dr Paul Whitelaw uses the tried and tested Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to explore and quantify differences in the perceptions of leadership styles at different levels of management within the hospitality industry. He introduces us to the complexities of managing within an industry that is service dominated with high expectations of product and service quality at all times of the day or night. The emotional and physical strains on employee wellbeing as well as the health and safety issues involved are almost as challenging as Professor Cherry’s description of Police work. What both articles highlight is that frontline employees bear the brunt of these stresses and strains. Both the police force and the hospitality industry operate with a diverse workforce and both need to rely on strong interpersonal and communication skills in the conduct of their work. Dr Whitelaw found that a different tool kit is needed in different leadership situations and that leaders need to understand which leadership style is effective in specific situations to achieve pre-determined goals.

Overall, it would seem there remains some confusion at the frontline about leadership styles and the strategies and paradigms that support them. A common theme in these articles is that there are issues within the Academy, in particular within business schools, that need to be addressed to prepare leaders to tackle the fundamental threats and challenges they may encounter and to address these in an ethical manner. The need for further empirical research to support leadership is reinforced in these articles. Most of all, however, we are reminded that the stories that come from the street, the words from the factory floor and the narratives of frontline employees are critical to leadership reflection so that sophisticated responses can be provided to those that need to master practice in a fluid environment. This flexibility is the key to contemporary leadership, whether liquid, wicked, complex or super complex for it is at the frontline that leadership will triumph or fail.

I commend this Special Issue to our readers.

Barry O’Mahony

Editor-in-Chief