Better leaders, or better leadership?

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Filling the knowledge gap will only take us so far in dealing with Australia's leadership problems, writes Helena Liu

The Australian Leadership Paradox: What It Takes to Lead in the Lucky Country
By Geoff Aigner and Liz Skelton | Allen & Unwin | $29.99

WHEN we think of leadership in Australia, high-profile CEOs like Marius Kloppers, Cameron Clyne and “Twiggy” Forrest often come to mind. Leadership has become so closely linked with powerful individuals occupying positions at the top of a hierarchy that it’s almost a given that “leadership” and “leaders” are one and the same. Leadership research reflects and perpetuates this thinking, with many mainstream theories intent on deducing a set of traits, behaviours and/or styles all leaders should adopt. Various attributes of “true” leadership are then packaged and disseminated via MBAs and executive coaching courses on the assumption that if the leader’s attitudes change, good leadership will follow.

Although prominent individuals can and do play a role in shaping values and practices, that role shouldn’t be overestimated. In a time of increasing uncertainty and complexity, leadership arguably needs to move beyond questions of who the leaders are, and begin to incorporate questions of how to lead with purpose. In their self-proclaimed “naive and ambitious venture,” Geoff Aigner and Liz Skelton set out to transform the way we think about and practise leadership in this country. They suggest that purposeful leadership starts with being alive to four cultural “paradoxes” of leadership. Australians, they argue, are anti-authority and authority-dependent; egalitarian and hierarchical; relational and competitive; and battling adversity and living in prosperity.

The authors draw on the experiences of white convicts and the Stolen Generation in Australia’s cultural biography to explain how we developed both dependence on and distrust for authority (Paradox 1). The implication is that we expect authority figures to provide for us, yet resent them for it. To counteract this paradox, Aigner and Skelton encourage us to rewrite our story of authority to include the notion that power should be exercised in the service of others. At the same time, all members of society ought to be empowered to participate rather than depend on authority figures to solve our problems.

Tensions between our egalitarian values and hierarchical reality in Paradox 2 are what Aigner and Skelton argue underlie the “tall poppy syndrome.” They cite a study by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett that shows how income inequality in Australia has worsened over the past three decades to the extent that, among the twenty-three largest developed nations, only Britain, the United States, Singapore and Portugal are more unequal. This increasing inequality sits at odds with our alleged egalitarian values, which the authors claim is why people with higher status deny their own power and privilege in attempts to be perceived as an “average” Australian. The authors suggest this paradox is overcome by pulling up rather than pushing down the collective.

Paradox 3 appears to be comprised of intersecting ideas about how our informal culture of “mateship” breeds uneasiness with competition, reinforces exclusion (as seen with “boys’ clubs”) and hinders our ability to innovate. Aigner and Skelton suggest we counteract this paradox by embracing our need for strong social relationships
and our individualism simultaneously. Like the previous paradox, the idea is that leaders need to exercise power with the whole collective in mind.

In their final paradox, Aigner and Skelton critique how we have romanticised the “Aussie battler” narrative, becoming blind to our prosperity and privilege. In my view, this gets to the heart of some of the most crucial societal problems we face, the way our tendency to glorify adversity and hardship manifests in an addiction to “crises.” Every problem becomes framed as an emergency, and we turn to our leaders to act as “commanders” by putting out short-term fires rather than attending to long-term challenges. Our failure to recognise our prosperity and privilege means we often shirk our responsibilities towards vulnerable people and intractable problems, such as asylum seekers and the environment.

**THE Australian Leadership Paradox** lifts the quality of the discussion of leadership in this country and articulates a utopian ideal in which power is exercised for the common good. Aigner and Skelton are inspiring in their optimism and make a compelling case that Australians must take collective responsibility for leadership.

Australia certainly needs a new leadership story – one that holds leadership to a higher standard of compassion, equality and justice. Before that story can be written, however, an uncomfortable question remains: who wrote the current story? Until we delve a little deeper into our existing leadership story and come to understand whom it benefits, I suspect the narrative will continually be retold.

Leadership is necessarily a political process. Yet problems such as income inequality, social exclusion and short-termism are presented in the book as though they are inadvertent side-effects of innocuous cultural values and practices around equality, mateship and adversity. This line of thinking treats leadership as naturally emerging from a fixed, neutral context. The solution, it follows, is to educate people to facilitate more ethical leadership.

The apolitical approach is extended by the authors’ assumption that the adverse consequences of power and privilege are the result of a lack of knowledge – a gap not yet filled, but which easily could be. The leaders cited in the book are almost always thoughtful, well-meaning individuals – people like Maurice, who learned to recognise his own rank and support his peers; Silas, the doctor who reflected on his own privilege with admirable clarity; and the senior executives at NAB, who have been spending time with Indigenous Australians, prisoners and refugees to broaden their own social awareness.

Honourable leaders undoubtedly exist. But my concern with the assumption that only the knowledge is missing is that it can have the effect of excusing people for their power abuses. After all, if they weren’t aware of their own power because of their “Australian” antipathy towards authority, then how can they be blamed for it?

Consequently, Aigner and Skelton play down leaders like those at Lehman Brothers, Hewlett-Packard or *News of the World*, who have demonstrated they are perfectly capable of abusing power for material gains. On the other hand, they appear to call “followers” into question for their cynicism towards authority. Australians are thus cast in a familiar stereotype of the whingeing larrikins who foolishly mock their leaders while pining for a “fantasy leader to arrive who can solve our problems.” Aigner and Skelton imply that the onus is on followers – including those who have traditionally been marginalised – to “show up,” step up, and take charge of their own participation in this country’s leadership.

The optimistic pro-power message of the book neglects to examine how power can be, and is, used to dominate, subjugate and exclude certain groups of people from participation in leadership. At the same time, the “followers” in community groups who battle against the odds are seldom acknowledged in the book. Those who are engaged in advocacy and activism in relation to poverty, inequality, climate change, domestic violence or homelessness represent Australians who are fighting to participate. Aigner and Skelton’s cast of leaders, from kindly CEOs to cooperative politicians, reinforce the seductive appeal of leadership.

Leadership in Australia is not such a unique tale. Income inequality, social exclusion and a focus on short-term problems at the expense of collective long-term challenges are apparent across the United States, Britain and Europe, and are symptomatic of the way we have come to define “leadership” via Western ideals of individualism, capitalism and masculinity.
More often than not, leadership is seen and valued in terms of powerful, charismatic individuals who mobilise followers to pursue organisational goals while producing material and symbolic success. Those occupying formal leadership positions need to “perform” their role in a way that is accepted by others as leadership.

Taking gender as just one example, accepted leadership performances include hyper-masculinist displays of self-confidence, paternalism and competitiveness that in turn reinforce the unequal social division of men from women (and some men from other men). Performances of race, class and sexual identity are equally strong and widespread, so that despite the increasing diversity of the Australian population, people occupying positions of power remain overwhelmingly white, male, heterosexual, middle-class and able-bodied.

*The Australian Leadership Paradox* offers a hopeful vision for leadership in this country, paved with practical tools for readers to employ in increasing our awareness of power and privilege. But measures to address individual knowledge gaps will only take us partway to an inclusive and just leadership story written by and for all Australians. That ambitious but critical venture is ultimately a revolutionary act to subvert existing power structures of inequality. Its success depends on our recognition, but unapologetic rejection, of the ways in which power is exercised to maintain the status quo.