

The Neuroscience of Leadership

*How our brains turn us into followers and leaders
and what we can do about it*

Bruce Hiebert, Ph.D.

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Dr. Bruce Hiebert

is an ethicist, historian, and demographer who works in the area of decision theory and organizational change. One of his most recent books is *Your Soul at Work: How to live your values in the workplace* (Northstone, 2005), and he is currently working on a number of projects related to neuropsychology, leadership and organizational development.

He works for the University Canada West where he is a Professor and Chair of the undergraduate programs. Dr. Hiebert is also available to consult or train on issues of leadership development, transition planning, or decision making. He can be reached at:

604-857-3579

brucehiebert@shaw.ca

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/bruce-hiebert/4/b20/710>



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403-1755 West Broadway

Vancouver, BC V6J 4S5

Phone 604-669-9405

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Leadership: Why everything you think you know about it is wrong

Bruce Hiebert, Ph.D.

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You can't help it, but almost everything you think you know about leadership is wrong. Worse still, you can't see the problem. That's because the problem is inside your head. It's your brain that's misleading you. Your brain has problems understanding leadership because of the way it is wired and that's why you do too.

Here is how it works: Your brain is wired to be highly sensitive to the exceptional. It is what kept your primate ancestors alive on the plains of Africa. As your ancestor stared out onto the plain, it was really important that it detect the singular strange waving in the grass that predicted the arrival of a predator. Failure to do so was likely to leave him or her dead and outside the gene pool. Any inattentive ancestor was food for a predator. But the one who became agitated at the sight of what might be a predator, and jumped up and down to warn the rest of the tribe, got to be the hero and not only survived, but prospered.

So brains that startled easily and fixated on the exception became the norm. That is the brain design that was handed down to you. That is the brain that can't see the leadership forest for the leadership trees. That is especially true if the tree is a predator, and there are few human predators more dangerous than a leader. The human being who brings the most risk to any human group is the leader. Becoming easily startled and strongly fixated on strong leaders is therefore not only natural but highly survival oriented. It's the way your brain works, and you are stuck with it. But that does not mean it is right.

Think about it, leadership is a natural human process for getting things done. All human groups need people who step forward to organize and direct. Ideally those who step forward have good ideas about how the work is best organized and what skills need to be learned. Those folk help us as groups to accomplish everything from childcare to healthcare to old-age security. We prosper because leaders direct our behaviour.

The caution is that at the same time as we place our trust in those folk, they are enabled to take advantage of us. As they direct the rest of us they can siphon off resources for themselves, take the best on the grounds that it is good for the group, and otherwise direct us for ends that are not so good for us but very good for them. Of course we let them get away with it. As long as we feel we are prospering we are prepared to allow them to take more than their share. However, that very faith and willingness to suspend our own judgment regarding the outcomes is a weakness. When we place our blind faith in leaders they can wreak complete havoc, starting wars, destroying the environment, and emptying our lives of meaning. They become predators, and the rest of us become prey.

The result is that it only makes sense that when we attend to leadership we attend to leaders who either are or might become predators. We need to get very jumpy around and fixate upon those who may turn out to prey upon the human condition. That means the highly competent, the manipulative, the charismatic, and the strong. Those are the folk who put us ordinary human beings at risk and therefore they are the ones we must attend to. So we do. Everything we study in leadership class and leadership books is about those competent, manipulative, charismatic, and strong figures who are also dangerous to our well-being. We study what they do and we study how to be like them. Our brains tell us that is the only thing to do.

The problem is that leadership is not just about strong, aggressive, human predators. It isn't just about people who understand how to manipulate others into doing their bidding. Leadership is also about ordinary people, full of compassion and humility, who inspire us to do great works on our own. They subtly hint and carefully encourage us to become the best we can be. They direct and push us in terms we embrace so whole-heartedly for ourselves that we never even realize someone else was there pushing us in the first place. They are great leaders too, but they disappear into the distance because our brains just can't see them. They aren't dangerous.

The solution to our failure to understand leadership lies in our ability to reflect on the blind spots in our thinking. Just as important to our survival as a species as our agitation and specific focus was our ability to critically reflect on our perceptions and attend to the gestalt. It isn't heroic and it isn't easy, but over time it leads to the accumulation of wisdom about our world, the wisdom that brought progress to our primate ancestors. In the case of leadership we can become wise by looking at ordinary groups and their ordinary leaders. They aren't the scary predator leaders upon whom we fixate so publicly, but they are the people who will teach us about successful group action. To truly understand leadership we need to put to one side the very people who our brains tell us are the epitome of leadership and look to those who are ordinary leaders in ordinary circumstances. Study them to learn true leadership. That is the path of leadership wisdom.

But don't forget that our fixation has survival value. We do need to understand those public great leaders. We need to understand them so we can keep ourselves safe from them. But let's not think they are teaching us anything about leaders. Let's work at wisdom and know that they are teaching us something about predators.

Why the SOB boss might be boss (and I'm not)

July 2013

Bruce Hiebert, Ph.D.

That the old style nasty boss might be a more effective leader than most of the leadership material credits him (and usually it is "him"). It might even be our fault—we nice, cooperative, middle managers—that he is so effective. It all has to do with our brains.

The primary reality of the human brain is that it is both social and efficient. For most of us that means that the best predictors of any decision we make are the preceding decisions of those with whom we associate. Sometimes this is called group think, and as a negative, indicates why so few original ideas are developed by groups (brainstorming is less effective for creating new ideas than the same people working independently). But what is really going on is that we are thinking efficiently and socially, and if an idea is good enough for those around us, then it is usually good enough for us too. The alternative is thinking up something new and then justifying it, something that is truly hard work (inefficient).

Except there are people for whom that is not the case. There are people who are less socially resonant. They have less "social intelligence". They just can't seem to fit into the way the group thinks. Some of them are out there on the psychopathy spectrum, quite ignorant to the reality that others have feelings. Others just don't know why feelings should be part of decisions, though they may be quite sensitive to their own feelings or the feelings of others. Regardless, for these folk there is an operational disconnect. Their social brain just doesn't take social data with as much seriousness as do most of us. They either enjoy, or are stuck with, a personal reality that every significant decision needs to be determined based on a careful examination of perception and a cold-hearted development of a rationale. For this latter group making tough decisions is normal because for them all decisions are hard work. They may or may not think analytically, but they are doing the taxing work of assessing conditions and developing alternatives.

You can think of these people as being gifted by nature with a particular aptitude. There are those with particular body types that make them more suited to specific sports. It is tough for a 6'4" guy with broad shoulders and a muscular build to be a top jockey, but he might be a superb hockey enforcer. The same is true for brain types. Each of us has a unique style of brain functioning, and each style has strengths and weaknesses for specific fields of human social and organizational endeavour.

So take those folk who have an emotion-decision disconnect and stick them in an organization and it

is not surprising that many of them rise to high levels, especially those who are intelligent or adept at manipulating social conditions. They are those who are capable of making significant decisions that break the norms. They can innovate, challenge the status quo, and make the tough decisions around resource allocation. They are prepared to stand up and vocally present alternative cases. They can even make the essential and very toughest decisions about terminating staff. It is not that other people cannot make these decisions, but this gifted minority either do not have the feelings that go with these tough decisions or are capable of separating feeling from decision in a way that makes these decisions relatively easy. The result is, when times are tough or changing, these people have the abilities that naturally take them to the top. They can actually get the job done.

Those of us who are forced to deal with feelings, who can't bear the thought of laying off associates or cutting the program funding for friends, hesitate at crucial points. We wait till the group feels good about the decision, or it is clear we had no choice in the dirty work. Of course that is sometimes too late and always those with the emotional disconnect will have made their decision long before us and be working their way to a promotion.

I want to caution here that this does not mean they did it right. No one knows who is actually right in most decisions until long after the fact. The reality in most organizations is that it is important simply to make a decision. The people who can make the tough decisions, right or wrong, jump ahead of most of the rest of us. It is their decision making capacity that does it, not any ability to make the best decision.

Nor are these people good leaders. They are typically not the type of people the rest of us trust and therefore are not the type of people we want to follow. They don't provide us with hope. They frighten us because they can think things the rest of us have trouble thinking. They can easily think of strategies that will hurt us and will implement them if they think they are good strategies based on criteria we can't use ourselves. They are uncomfortable people in a social universe and normally we don't want them around, let alone to follow them. They come across to the rest of us as potential or real predators.

Worse still, they may have found through trial and error that anger and bullying are excellent ways of accomplishing their objectives. Most folks are already unconsciously afraid of these people, so it is

an efficient step from there to bullying in order to get the job done. If bullying works once, it is three-quarters of the way to becoming standard strategy.

So that bad guy at the top might not be such a bad guy. He (or sometimes she) is just an efficient and effective consequence of normal organizational social processes. Nice people finish last, just

because they take the time to be nice. It is the easy way out for everyone.

I could end by challenging all the nice people not to be so nice, but that wouldn't be nice of me. Instead I'm going to smile at my boss and wish him a good day, and hope I make it through the next round of lay-offs. So far it is working for me. I hope it works for you too.

A very incomplete list of further reading

(Merely a taste of the folk who are working with the ideas integrated in the presentation tonight.)

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