1 Why leadership?

The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently. (Foucault, 1985, p. 9)

Leadership is not a ‘mystical or ethereal concept’. Rather, leadership is an observable, learnable set of practices. Certainly leaders make a difference. There is no question about it. (Bass, 2008, p. 10)

AN INVITATION TO THINK DIFFERENTLY

We have come to live in an age where leadership is the solution, regardless of the problem. Pre-eminent leadership scholar Bernard Bass is even willing to declare that ‘there is no question’ about just how vital leadership is. As part of this, managers are now routinely expected to be ‘visionary’, ‘charismatic’, ‘transformational’ and ‘authentic’ leaders, creating ‘breakthrough strategies’ and ‘inspiring’ employees to ever higher levels of performance.1 Leadership, it is now widely thought, is the vital ingredient which enables organizations to achieve their goals and have a highly productive, engaged workforce. These days, whatever the challenge, we are presumed lost without leadership. But with leadership, anything and everything becomes possible – anything, it seems, except thinking differently about leadership itself, because its value, its potency and what we expect from it are now beyond doubt: whatever the issue, leadership is the answer.

Research on leadership has grown rapidly in recent decades, simultaneously reflecting and feeding our intense interest in this topic.2 The efforts of academics in promoting ‘visionary’, ‘charismatic’, ‘transformational’ and ‘authentic’ approaches to leadership means that these ideas are typically understood as modern, enlightened and grounded in scientific research. Yet, in the vast, confusing and often contradictory body of recent literature on leadership, only rarely is the confidence we have that leadership constitutes the panacea for all manner of organizational and social challenges questioned.3
Because of this state of affairs, because of this intense faith in the potency of leadership and the demanding expectations we have of managers-as-leaders, my concern here is to examine how and why we have come to understand leadership in this particular way – and what these understandings do for and to leaders, followers, their relationship and society more generally.

An important proposition being advanced here is that the conventional understanding we have of leadership today is profoundly limited, limiting and problematic. However, the overarching argument threading through this book is that whatever else leadership might be, it is fundamentally a social invention – and hence wide open to re-invention, if we only but free ourselves to think differently about it. I argue that this thing we call leadership, so commonly assumed a timeless, universal ‘fact’ of ‘human nature’, has, rather, been invented and re-invented in many different forms over a long period of time. Each particular ‘form’ of leadership has its own unique history, relies on a particular set of assumptions, incites a particular set of effects, serves a particular set of interests and is implicitly designed to address a particular set of problems. Paying attention to these particulars and examining different forms of leadership from the past and the present, as I do here, enables us to grasp that ‘leadership’ is something malleable, something that we can (re-)form in a manner which reflects our priorities and our values, should we conclude that existing forms don’t serve our interests well. Rather than being held in sway to the faith that leadership is and always has been the answer to our problems, we can instead critically assess its varying forms and what each form does for and to us.

Given all this, one thing this book offers is an appreciation of the varied ways in which leadership has been thought of, allowing you to expand your sense of what leadership can be. More than this, though, I hope this examination of what ideas about leadership can do to our sense of self, as leader and follower, and the wider social function such ideas serve, will encourage you to think carefully about what you expect of yourself and others, as leaders and followers, and how leadership can best be formed in ways that serve shared notions of a good society. In particular, the framework for re-thinking leadership which I offer in Chapter 8 can support you to invent, in your community, a uniquely tailored theory of ‘leadership’ which reflects its shared values, needs and concerns, this being in sharp contrast to the generic, context-free ‘recipes’ that constitute the nature of most contemporary leadership theories.

To try to make sense of how and why we have come to understand leadership in the way we now do, what follows is, in part, an intellectual
history of Western leadership thought, examining Classical Greek, medi-
eväl and modern ideas about leadership. It is a history of scholarly ideas
on the topic of leadership, tracing developments in thought over time and
connecting those developments to the context in which they arose.
However, in order to also understand what these ideas about leadership
do for and to leaders, followers, their relationship and society more
generally, these ideas are treated as discourse, in the sense developed by
Michel Foucault – meaning, basically, that I examine how these ideas
construct specified, disciplined ways of being and particular ways of
ordering relations between people. This perspective also means that I am
not testing here whether the ideas about leadership which I examine are
‘true’, in the sense of asking if they accurately reflect a ‘reality’ which
exists beyond the page of the text. Rather, my analysis looks at what is
incited by these ideas irrespective of their truthfulness – because history
teaches us that irrespective of their scientific credibility, ideas are
powerful if they are believed.

This stepping aside from questions of truthfulness allows me to treat
leadership knowledge as, in and of itself, a socio-political act, as an
attempt to say something about how the world ought to be. I treat the
statements scholars make on the topic of leadership as responses to what
they hold to be the problems of their day, as imbued with the assump-
tions of the time in which they are written and as offering prescriptions to
leader and followers on how they should act and relate to others. Viewed
in this way, leadership knowledge can be understood as enabling and
requiring certain specific ways of being and doing leadership, a con-
figuration whose dimensions we can then examine and ask ‘what does
this do to and for us?’ and ‘whose and what interests are served by this
approach?’. With this perspective, we can bring into focus the context in
which leadership ideas emerge and which informs those ideas. We can
look at the micro-level effects of these ideas for leaders’ and followers’
sense of self, and for their relationship. And, we can look at the
macro-level effects of a given form of ‘leadership’ for society more
generally. That, in a nutshell, is the nature and scope of the analytic
moves I work through as I examine how leadership has been thought
about at different times.

My process of inquiry into this topic, however, didn’t begin in my head
but in my gut. More precisely, it began with a churning in my gut as time
after time, as an executive in a large government-owned company
(17,000 employees and contractors), I felt my own leadership efforts
were somehow lacking, despite my best efforts. In my role as a General
Manager of Human Resources, I would work hard at role modelling the
kind of leadership I and my fellow executives said we wanted to see in
Thinking differently about leadership

the organization. We drew on ideas of leadership as involving ‘vision’, ‘transformation’ and ‘authenticity’ with confidence that these were credible, proven, modern approaches. Being New Zealanders, a culture where, traditionally, ‘showing off’ and fine rhetorical flourishes are viewed with some suspicion, we were somewhat less inclined to promote expectations of ‘charisma’ – but we also weren’t averse to rewarding and promoting those seen as being charismatic.

I took the expectations we had of managers in our company seriously and considered it crucial, both in ethical and instrumental terms, for me to practice what we preached. So I tried to be ‘visionary’, ‘transformational’ and ‘authentic’, and if others perceived me as ‘charismatic’, then all well and good. Yet, it seemed that no matter what I tried, someone, somewhere, was not satisfied with my leadership; 360-degree survey feedback would tell me I was doing too much of ‘x’ or not enough of ‘y’. Employee engagement surveys would indicate ‘gaps’ in areas that I, as ‘leader’, was expected to have acted on. It came to seem that if I was to be a ‘good leader’ I needed to be perfect, but I knew I wasn’t and couldn’t ever be, and so I felt trapped and overwhelmed by these seemingly impossible expectations. I thought I generally did a pretty good job at ‘leading’, and I was lucky to have a lot of supporters, but I also thought that relative to what people seemed to expect of leaders I was never going to be good enough.

As part of my role as a member of the executive leadership team (ELT) at this company, I would also regularly visit some of our 500-plus worksites spread throughout New Zealand. During these visits, employees would frequently raise good ideas about how to solve issues affecting their worksite or about doing something new and different. However, even when they held the necessary authority to implement their ideas, staff would commonly ask for ELT sponsorship and endorsement for their initiatives, appearing to believe that matters could not improve without this. I found this confusing. The ELT at that time consisted of just 11 people. How could 11 people possibly hope to know everything that was going on in a company of 17,000? How could the ELT possibly be expected to make every decision or assess every idea for improvement? It seemed as if the more ‘leadership’ was emphasized as the key to success, the more dependent on leaders we were making everyone else, and that, I felt, could not be a good thing.

These two lessons – that the expectations held of leaders were impossible to live up to and that emphasizing leadership somehow resulted in others becoming dependent on leaders – stuck with me for a long time. In subsequent work I’ve done in many different organizations, I have found these same patterns of thought and behaviour: whatever the
nature of the problem or opportunity, ‘leadership’ is seen as being necessary to make progress. Not just clever people working well together. Not just good ideas. These alone are not seen to be sufficient. Instead, ‘leadership’ is called upon as the default requirement, the magic ingredient, the vital necessity, without which nothing good will eventuate. And so from these experiences, over a period of time, I developed the sense that somehow we just weren’t thinking about leadership in the right way, that our ideas about leadership were somehow deeply problematic. It was this sense that I carried with me into the research process which gave rise to this book.

Importantly, these lessons mean that while I engage here in a determined critique of influential contemporary leadership theories, what you will not find is something that is anti-leader or anti-leadership. I am not ‘against’ anyone in a leadership role who, as I did, is trying their level best to cope with the demands of their role. Nor am I opposed to the existence of leadership roles. This is not some wildly idealistic, anti-authority polemic. My concern is the particular, onerous, inflated, impossible expectations we have built up about leadership and what it can do for us, expectations that I have come to see as deeply problematic and in need of challenge. My worry is that our conventional understanding of ‘leadership’ is causing harm and giving rise to problematic effects, matters which can be avoided, or at least minimized, if we think differently about leadership. My aim is, unashamedly, to expose the nature of the harm our present thinking can create – as doing so is necessary to motivate change. I also trace why and how this situation has come about, identify the key assumptions which it rests on and offer ideas for what we can do about it. If you have tried to lead others and found it profoundly challenging or have become disillusioned with the efforts of those in leadership positions, then this book offers a basis for reflecting on the assumptions and expectations that society today has about leadership, such that you can begin to think differently about leadership. That is the provocation and the invitation on offer. What follows may delight or infuriate. You may disagree strongly with some or even all of what I have to say. But chances are that you will still look at leadership through different eyes as a result, and that, I believe, is all for the good.

LEADERSHIP TODAY

In recent decades, leadership has been extensively promoted by management scholars and practitioners alike as a vital force for good, crucial to
overcoming the myriad challenges facing groups, organizations and even
societies, and securing a better future. Such is the confidence of
proponents of this view that Bass can even claim that the value of
leadership is now beyond debate. However, while it has recently been
argued that ‘the fundamental question we must ask is, what do we know
and what should we know about leaders and leadership’, I contend that
the emphasis and expectations now placed on leaders and leadership
instead demand analysis of why and how it is we have come to constitute
‘leadership’ as the answer to all our problems.

Effective leadership is commonly understood in the modern West as
having ‘visionary’, ‘charismatic’, ‘transformational’ and, more
recently, ‘authentic’ qualities. Collectively, these ideas are known as the
‘new leadership’ school. Leadership of this intense, powerful and
compelling nature has, over the last quarter century, come to constitute
the expected standard for managerial performance and to be widely
accepted as something which employees, ‘followers’, both need and
benefit from.

With the development of ‘new leadership’, leadership is now generally
understood as valuable and desirable for every situation and context.
Leaders are held up as admirable persons in possession of highly desired
and valued qualities or skills. Effective leaders are said to generate
quantitatively and qualitatively superior results. Central to the credibil-
ity of these claims has been the understanding that our grasp of
leadership now derives from robust, scientific methods of inquiry. As a
consequence of all these factors, the confident expectation that we must
have ‘leadership’ in order to overcome whatever challenge a group,
organization or society faces and to achieve our individual and collective
potential has become naturalized and normalized, perhaps even auto-
nomous. The critical scholarly tradition, however, demands that any social
practice, norm or value that is ‘taken for granted’ needs careful scrutiny,
because its dominant hold on our thinking and behaviour limits us. This
is especially important when dealing with something involving unequal
power relations, as leadership typically does.

Critically informed interest in leadership has certainly grown in recent
years, often drawing attention to the difficulties managers have in living
up to the hype that now surrounds leadership. Existing critical studies,
broadly speaking, also build a case that the ‘gap’ they routinely find
between leadership theory and leadership practice is not typically
grounded in bad leadership practice but, rather, in bad leadership theory –
theory which fails to grapple with the contradictory, complex, relational
nature of our selves and the ambiguous, contested contexts in which we
work. Indeed, a notable feature of the most influential contemporary
leadership theories is their absolute refusal to engage with postmodern understandings of the self and the context-blind nature of their prescriptions.20 However, despite these insights into the current state of leadership theory and practice, research on the ‘culture- and discourse-driven nature’ of how leadership is conventionally understood is something that remains ‘neglected in most of the literature’.21 In other words, the question as to why and how we have come to be so captured by these particular ways of thinking about leadership needs more attention – which is where this book comes in.

The approach taken here is motivated by three key concerns with the current expectations we have of leadership. First, current thinking places expectations of almost super-human capability and performance on people in leadership positions. This creates enormous, distressing and harmful pressures on those striving to meet these expectations,22 as well as encouraging hubris by those who come to see themselves in such grandiose terms.23 Second, it both relies on and reinforces the idea that the vast majority of people are somehow lacking, incapable of overcoming challenges without the exceptional few leading the way.24 This, worryingly, undermines the values necessary for sustaining a liberal democratic society, such as the importance of active participation from all citizens on issues of common concern and egalitarian attitudes being central to interactions between people.25 Third, the more this positioning of leadership as ‘the solution’ to every challenge comes to seem normal and natural, the more difficult it becomes to think both critically and creatively about leadership.26 Thought itself is disciplined, channelled in a particular fashion, constrained, when a given set of ideas (a discourse) exerts such a hold on our understanding of what is real, true and good.27 Cumulatively, then, the current understanding and positioning of leadership as the solution to every challenge poses multiple problematic consequences in diverse matters such as producing harmful effects for leaders’ and followers’ sense of self, facilitating power relations which favour the ‘gifted’ minority (‘leaders’) and diminishing the role and status of the ‘ordinary’ majority (‘followers’), thereby damaging the values needed to sustain a democratic society and, through its sheer hold on our thinking, inhibiting theoretical innovation.

Importantly, leadership has not always been held up as the answer to every problem. Early 20th-century management scholars, for example, gave leadership little attention, focusing instead on structured, routinized systems and processes as key drivers of organizational performance.28 Earlier, Enlightenment era political philosophers were deeply concerned to limit the power and influence of leaders, claiming that individuals and society as a whole were better served by so doing.29 They wanted leaders
to have less influence. From their perspective, leadership was a problem to be managed, not a solution. How, then, did we end up where we are now, seemingly at the very opposite end of the spectrum to some key founding assumptions of modernity?

FOCUS AND SCOPE

To analyze this state of affairs, the overarching question which I examine here is ‘how and why has our understanding of leadership come to take the form it now does?’ Clearly, this implies both a historical (‘how’) and theoretical (‘why’) dimension to the analysis. However, to provide a richly layered account of these developments there are five supplementary questions which I also address. First, to situate developments in leadership thought in the context in which they first arose, I ask, ‘what issues deemed “problematic” shaped the development of the leadership discourses examined here?’ Second, to understand what the ideas I examine rely on, intellectually, I ask, ‘what key themes and assumptions inform them?’ Third and fourth, to consider what these ideas do for and to us, I ask, ‘what subjectivities and relationships are incited?’ and ‘what is the social function of these discourses?’ And, finally, to consider long-term patterns in leadership thought, I ask, ‘what changes and continuities are notable when comparing these discourses?’ These questions provide the basis for a multi-dimensional analysis, dimensions informed by the work of Michel Foucault.30

Philosophically, the approach I take rests on an understanding of language as constitutive of our reality, rather than merely being a tool to represent in words things that already exist.31 This means that the words we use to make sense of the world do not merely describe more or less accurately some pre-existing objective reality. Rather, through language we actually create that reality, in the sense of creating a set of categories, definitions and meanings through which we then interpret the world and act in it. This understanding implies that we can only ‘be’ and ‘do’ that of which we can speak intelligibly, meaning possibilities for being and doing which cannot be spoken of intelligibly are rendered impossible and unacceptable.32

As particular ideas (expressed in language) come into vogue and become accepted as legitimate and truthful understandings, they inform and motivate particular social practices, generating routinized ways of acting that are deemed appropriate and shaping our sense of self and others. Combined, both the language used and the associated practices in relation to a particular topic form a discourse or, more bluntly, a
Why leadership?

discursive regime – a particular way of ordering human activity. This disciplining effect of discourse, of what is deemed acceptable and intelligible, provides a compelling reason to examine leadership theory, understood here as a discourse/discursive regime, to examine how and why it constitutes, defines and disciplines ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ and ‘leadership’ in particular, limited and often problematic ways.

The book offers a series of case studies examining scholarly texts from different times which address the topic of leadership. I focus on specific periods in Western history when leadership has been an active topic of scholarly debate: Classical Greece of the 4th and 5th centuries BC, 16th- and 17th-century Europe, and the modern (mostly Anglo-American) West, beginning from around the middle of the 19th century and through to the present day. As a comprehensive account of every leadership text within these periods is far beyond the scope of one book, I focus on those ideas about leadership which dominated the scholarly literature in these periods. While understanding the diversity of opinions about leadership in each period is of inherent value, I look at the prevailing scholarly understanding of leadership of a given time based on the pre-supposition that these dominant ideas had, or have, the most influence.

As a result of its design and focus, this study reaches into times and spaces not previously subjected to analysis of the type offered here, revealing previously unacknowledged connections between the past and the present in leadership thought. Contemporary leadership ideas are placed, here, within a much broader historical context than has previously been done, enabling a more fulsome assessment of the ‘progress’ that has been made in recent decades. This strategy is intended to achieve a critical distance from the present in which we are normally embedded in order to ‘free thought … and so enable it to think differently’. The subsequent comparative analysis arising from this approach enables the assessment of both change and continuity in thought, further supporting the achievement of critical distance from current norms.

This book proceeds on the basis that recourse to comforting narratives which simply assume an ever-increasing state of enlightenment as regards our knowledge of leadership will not suffice in accounting for our way of thinking about leadership. However, a critical history of the type offered here not only explains how and why we have come to this understanding. It can also enhance our ability to develop new approaches. Consequently, I use my key findings to explore new ways of conceptualizing leadership in a manner which seeks to address the pitfalls and tensions I identify in current and past models. Specifically, I set out a flexible framework which can be used to invent forms of leadership
Thinking differently about leadership

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uniquely tailored to specific circumstances and reflecting different norms, values and assumptions.

In showing why and how different ideas about ‘what is leadership’ have prevailed at different times, the book foregrounds the vital influence that time, place, circumstances and assumptions have on both past and current versions of the truth about leadership. My analysis reveals, moreover, that our current understanding of leadership ought not to be seen as grounded in an approach more enlightened and truthful than anything that has come before. Rather, just as at other times in the past, it is contemporary problems, politically informed processes of idea formation and the broader intellectual preferences of our age which profoundly shape what we today see and accept as constituting an accurate account of ‘what is leadership’.

From these findings I extend my argument to a questioning of the very ontology of leadership. Through showing how leadership has been thought of at different points in time, this book argues that far from being a stable, enduring ‘fact’ of ‘human nature’ now revealed to us by modern science, as is typically assumed, leadership is most usefully understood as an unstable social invention, morphing in form, function and effect in response to changing norms, values and circumstances. What I show is that the ‘truth’ about leadership currently so widely accepted is an elaborate but contingent, constructed and ultimately fragile invention. Other truths about leadership have existed in the past and have been similarly elaborate, contingent, constructed and fragile. From understanding these developments, however, we are much better placed to make choices about the way in which we might re-invent leadership to suit current concerns and values. My central thesis, then, is that the conventional understanding of leadership now prevailing is profoundly problematic, not least for its hegemonic hold on our thinking, but that, being a contingent construction and not something grounded in nature or science, this situation is open to change.

My theory is that the phenomenon we call ‘leadership’ is fundamentally a social, political invention. Its ontology is fluid, unstable and not something fixed in ‘human nature’. What leadership is, therefore, is open to adaptation. What we call on leadership to do and to be depends on what problems we ask it to address, the assumptions we make about ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ (if we choose to conceive of such roles), and what we value. In whatever form it takes, what we understand as ‘leadership’ will be shaped by relations of power and power/knowledge dynamics which discipline what is deemed ‘acceptable’ and ‘truthful’, yet these, too, are ever changing. Leadership, then, is an invention – and hence open to re-invention.
This way of thinking about the nature of leadership runs entirely counter to that which dominates contemporary leadership studies where priority is given to determining universal truths about leadership, something assumed to have enduring characteristics and capable of being assessed in objective terms. Here, in contrast, the proposition is that there is no singular, objective truth about leadership ‘out there’, waiting to be discovered by the deployment of the scientific method. As a consequence, we need to change how we typically go about our thinking about leadership.

Taking on this challenge, I show how adopting this perspective enables theoretical innovation, offering new approaches to leadership which seek to overcome or ameliorate the problematic consequences of current understandings for leaders and followers identified already and explored further here. Liberating leadership thought from the discursive frame in which it is currently trapped, as I seek to do here, therefore supports recent calls for leadership practice that also seeks to liberate. The end result is that this book not only explains why we ought to think differently about leadership but also offers a framework for how we can do just that.

The major limitations of this research pertain to its scope in respect of the periods studied, the data sources used, the themes I focus on and the theoretical framework used to interrogate the data. In all these matters, the research is partial and not comprehensive. While I contend that the conclusions I reach are grounded in a plausible, carefully considered and reasoned interpretation of the data using the theoretical framework I adopted, the material I reviewed is limited in scope and my questions were such as to direct my attention only to some aspects of that material. All research suffers from limitations of this nature.

The major contribution of this research is to place the form and formation of contemporary leadership scholarship in a wider historical context than other studies have done, such that its apparent grounding in modern, scientific and enlightened thinking now seems questionable. The analysis presented here calls into doubt what has been so widely promoted and accepted as truthful and positive in recent decades. My findings give us pause to ask ourselves: have we got it right? Is this approach to leadership really what we need? Denting and defamiliarizing the naturalized, normalized status of contemporary leadership discourse is, thus, the major contribution of this research.
HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

So far I have offered only an introductory overview of the topic of inquiry and how it is addressed in this book. I have also previewed in summary form what is to be argued. Looking ahead, in Chapter 2 I examine the current state of the leadership literature in considerably more depth, providing a wide overview of different types of leadership knowledge before honing in to highlight the limited and problematic nature of existing, dominant understandings of organizational leadership. Chapters 3 to 6 then offer four ‘case studies’ of leadership thought at different times. Chapter 3 focuses on the leadership thought of the Classical Greeks, the era of the Athenian democracy. Chapter 4 looks at leadership thought in 16th- and 17th-century Europe, the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Chapter 5 examines the origins of modern leadership science found in the work of Thomas Carlyle and the subsequent trait theorists. Chapter 6 then examines the post-World War II period, looking at the dominant theoretical developments from then through to the present-day era in which ‘new leadership’ thought prevails.

For each of these periods, I look at the problems informing leadership thought and trace how the ideas emerged. I explore the key assumptions the ideas rely on and the key themes being promoted, as well as what the ideas do to and for us. This ‘time-travelling’ also makes it possible for me to identify both change and continuity over time in leadership thought, so it is this issue which forms the specific focus of Chapter 7. In Chapter 8, I consolidate the key findings in respect of the research questions and offer a new approach to theorizing leadership which arises from the preceding analysis. For readers unfamiliar with the work of Michel Foucault, the Method Notes at the end of the book may prove helpful to explore before you start on my case studies, to familiarize yourself with the Foucauldian concepts and approach shaping my analysis.

WHO THE BOOK IS INTENDED FOR

The book is intended to offer an intellectually rigorous and challenging but still accessible analysis of leadership thought. It does not require or assume any prior knowledge of the periods it examines. It does not require or assume any prior knowledge of leadership theory or of the work of Michel Foucault. Technical terms are kept to a minimum. If you have by and large followed this first chapter then you should encounter no major issues in coping with the rest of the book.
Consequently, then, the book is intended to be suitable for student, scholarly and practitioner audiences as a work whose primary purpose is to get you thinking about leadership by examining how others have been thinking about leadership. For students, the book offers a wide-ranging analysis of influential leadership theories, past and present. It can therefore serve to orient you to the leadership studies field, as well as to enable you to think critically about leadership knowledge more generally, something your teachers will, in all likelihood, actually appreciate and reward.

For critically minded leadership and management scholars, the study here extends existing critique via its examination of times and issues not examined previously, as well as offering a framework to enable localist approaches to leadership theorizing. For more mainstream leadership scholars this book will likely be confronting, for it may challenge many of your key assumptions. However, I hope you find this helpful in sparking reflection on how you approach future research efforts, for if nothing else this book highlights the crucial influence of scholarly assumptions in generating leadership knowledge.

For practitioners in leadership roles, this book does not offer you tips and tactics on how to be a ‘better’ leader: for that, your local airport bookshop is probably already filled with many such offerings. However, if you have found the expectations held of you as a leader challenging to fulfil, or you are looking for ideas on how to tailor your leadership approach to your own circumstances, then this book should help with those concerns. For practitioners not in leadership roles, this book reveals the problematic assumptions that may be limiting your freedom of action and influencing what you expect of yourself and those who ‘lead’ you.

For all readers, this book provides a basis for reflecting on what leadership means for you and what expectations you have for it in relation to the diversity of challenges which our communities and organizations encounter. After reading this book, leadership may no longer seem as if it should constitute the answer to every problem, given what I suggest is its typically vexed character. Maybe you will pay greater heed to the trends and events that are simply far beyond the control of our leaders no matter how capable they are, this reality being played out in the news every day, if only we care to look. Maybe the development of effective laws and policies to govern behaviour, maybe mass action on the issues we care about, maybe these things will come to seem more potent means of achieving enduring change than the frenetic search for the exceptional few to save us from ourselves. Perhaps too, if our expectations about leaders and leadership become more modest, more accepting that they don’t offer us the solution to every problem, we may
ask more of ourselves as community members, and at the same time ensure that those we allow into leadership roles are properly held to account against standards that are realistic, not godlike. Leadership is ours to invent, I argue here, so let us invent it with care, seeing it as but one mechanism, one means that may, sometimes, help in addressing our needs, but not the answer to every problem.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Bass, 1985a; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; George, 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2007
2. Bolden et al., 2011; Jackson and Parry, 2011
3. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2015; Sinclair, 2007
4. Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 2002; Schruijer and Vansina, 2002
5. See, for example, Bass, 1985a; Kotter, 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 2007
8. Bennis and Nanus, 1985
9. House, 1977
10. Bass, 1985a
11. Luthans and Avolio, 2003
13. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011a; Bass and Riggio, 2006; Jackson and Parry, 2011
15. See, for example, Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Zaleznik, 1977
16. See, for example, Bass, 2008; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1988
17. See, for example, Antonakis, Cianciolo and Sternberg, 2004; Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2012
19. See, for example, Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008; Sinclair, 2007
22. Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2007
23. Kellerman, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2003; Schruijer and Vansina, 2002; Tourish, 2014
25. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Parker, 2002; Russell, 1984
26. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Foucault, 1985
27. Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978
28. See, for example, Fayol, 1930; Taylor, 1919
29. See, for example, Locke, 2010 [1690]; Mill, 1989 [1851]. Original dates of publication are noted in square brackets
31. Foucault, 1972; Hacking, 1999
32. Foucault, 1972
33. Foucault, 1972
34. Foucault, 1985, 1986
35. Foucault, 1985, p. 9
36. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Dean, 1994
37. Foucault, 1980
38. Alvesson, 1996; Alvesson and Spicer, 2011a; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2012
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39. See, for example, Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2007
40. Sinclair, 2007