Preface

The contributors to this volume were moved to write about leadership and dissent because of the persistence and growth of leadership failures. Over the past two decades, as research studies and popular books on leadership effectiveness multiplied exponentially, instances of leaders who have ruined business organizations, led religious institutions to cover up illegal and immoral behavior, initiated pre-emptive war and failed to prevent wholesale slaughter of civilian populations – that is, instances of leadership failure – have mushroomed to the point where we no longer are shocked by scandals and institutional catastrophes. Lee Iacocca’s strenuous demand to know ‘what the hell has happened to our leaders?’ (Iacocca, 2007: 7), seems almost quaintly atavistic.

Yet Iacocca’s polemic has merit. We agree that there are unprecedented failings among leaders of democratic institutions and purportedly merit-driven systems. We agree that much of the trend is attributable to personal greed, careerism, hubris and arrogance – and passivity among the electorate and consumer public. What is missing from Iacocca’s analysis, however, and from most scholarly work on leadership, is a focus on the critically important role of dissent.

Leaders face the influence of dissent in two main ways. First, one of the central tasks undertaken by all position-leaders is to deal with resistance to their leadership. That is, what leaders do fundamentally is to overcome contrarian challenges to their vision of problems and opportunities, to their direction-giving and to their meanings. In short, leaders manage dissent. Of course managing dissent isn’t all that leaders do. But if they don’t do something about contrarian visions, contested power and diverse understandings, they aren’t leading or in a leadership situation. They’re merely occupying a position.

The second way leaders and dissent are related is found in the resources dissent brings to leadership. Dissent is the contrast medium by which we recognize leadership. More importantly, dissenters bring to decision-making fresh information, unpopular or non-normative perspectives and agendas, challenges to accepted ways of thinking and acting, opportunities to test and improve understandings. In the highly dynamic environment faced by governments, work organizations and other institutions in the early twenty-first century, vigorous and open engagement of leaders and
dissenters is essential for successful anticipation and response to increasingly rapid social and technological change.

For these reasons, we offer in this collection of essays a focused exploration of dissent and leadership failures. By examining how the subversion or denial of dissent contributes to leadership failure, we aim to provide a diagnosis that will head us toward some tentative remedies. In the first chapter I analyze shortcomings in our language of leadership and our understanding of its foundational assumptions. Brian Martin describes in Chapter 2 the wide variety of forms dissent takes, along with their contexts and their typical consequences. The social and psychological aspects of dissent when the going is tense or dangerous because of perceived crises is the topic of Jean Lipman-Blumen’s Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 Stephanie Hamel and Ruth Guzley examine the potential for effective dissent across generations, with special concern for the ‘Millennial’ generation.

Following these foundational chapters are essays that focus on ways dissent is expressed and managed in various settings. In Chapter 5 Howard F. Stein explores the language of dissent management in work organizations and presents vivid cases to illustrate the human consequences of suppressed dissent. Chapter 6 presents an examination of leaders’ uses of public relations for engaging dissenters; there I also show how public relations can be a force for dissenting from misguided leadership. In Chapter 7 Patrice M. Buzzanell, Rebecca Meisenbach and Robyn Remke illustrate how women in work and community organizations become channeled into dissenting roles; more pivotally, they show how women use dissent productively, both for improving institutional processes and for balancing women’s power in groups by engaging in dissent leadership. Chapter 8, by Gail T. Fairhurst and Heather Zoller, takes leadership in dissenting groups as its central concern; through analysis of resistance within team-based participative management systems, they highlight five key lessons for leadership generated by understanding dissent. In David S. Allen’s Chapter 9, the professionalization and rationalization of journalism are shown to exert constraining forces on dissent among journalists and, by extension, to manage dissent among citizens. Paul Toscano argues in Chapter 10 that to dissent is a sacred act, and he shows how dissent in religious life is necessary for the spiritual well-being of believers and religious institutions. Chapter 11 engages one of the most profound concerns of dissent and leadership – their interrelation in cultures of fear during war and in people’s work lives. Considering both political discourse and work discourse to be our new public sphere, George Cheney and Daniel J. Lair argue that fear and fearfulness are behind the paradoxes and parallels of dissent in the public spheres of politics, particularly during times of war, and the workplace.
In the penultimate chapter, Chapter 12, Robyn Penman offers fresh thinking on the problems of dissent management by leaders. Linking dissent to the Enlightenment quest for certainty and the denial of diversity, Penman demonstrates how a new approach to communicating and a post-modern view of social relations and practice can create the necessary space for effective dissent. In the concluding chapter I ask (and offer provisional answers to the questions) how does dissent benefit leaders, and what steps can leaders take to engage dissenters in collaborations for change?

In preparing this volume I have been uncommonly lucky to enjoy the collaboration and guidance of many fine colleagues. My first and largest debt is to the contributing authors, whose diligence and enthusiasm for this project were unwavering. I also am grateful for the encouragement of my advisory team, Warren Bennis, George Cheney, Ruth Guzley, Gail T. Fairhurst, Jean Lipman-Blumen, Jeff Schmidt and Meg Wheatley. We all owe a special thank-you to Ruth Guzley, whose idea originated the project at the 2003 meeting of the International Leadership Association in Guadalajara, Mexico. My thanks also go to the Edward Elgar editorial staff. Alan Sturmer has been of inestimable help in the early stages of the work. Bob Pickens and the production staff have made the process a truly enjoyable collaboration. I am grateful to Joanne Ciulla, New Horizons in Leadership Series editor, who has inspired and informed many of us by her innovative thinking and writings about moral leadership.

Last, first and most heartfelt is my gratitude to Anna Banks.

Stephen P. Banks

REFERENCE

Iacocca, Lee (2007), Where Have All the Leaders Gone?, with Catherine Whitney. New York: Scribner.