

# Leadership and Influence

by Michael Baker and Jamie Drummond

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The 2016 US presidential election has dominated the world news for the best part of a year and a half now; the result, highly anticipated by some and dreaded by others, has prompted me to question how I choose to define leadership. With the first 100 days of Donald Trump's Presidency well underway, the issue of what a leader should and shouldn't be is seemingly on everyone's lips. His brand of leadership seems to me to be about being right; he appears to revel in telling others what to do and enjoys the trappings of power and status. I have no qualms saying I'm completely opposed to this approach, it flies in the face of much of what I've learned over the years about what people need from a leader. Though it's not the dominating superpower it once was, the world still pays close attention to the USA: and I feel the example being set here is a dangerous one. This is one of the many pivotal debates that shapes the world we live in, and I felt it important to put something in writing outlining what I view leadership to be about: this article is the result.

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Even in the comparatively short time of 30 years that I've been working I've seen a radical shift in views on what leadership in organisations should look like; this gradual shift in leadership practice has become evident to me through the behaviour of the great leaders that I've worked with. The rather domineering idea

of “boss knows best” may well be a thing of the past; swathes of leadership models have been developed recently that have changed our understanding and approach. Distributive, servant, and authentic are just a few such models that are now prevalent in modern leadership development programmes.

I would struggle to give a single definition on what a leader should look like, or at least one that would be commonly accepted anyway. After all, leaders usually appear drastically different to one another depending on context: whether they're part of a business, school, community group, or political organisation as examples. This being the case, I find it easier to frame a definition in terms of the idea behind it rather than by physical appearance. In my opinion, **the essence of leadership is about setting direction and establishing a vision for the future, then guiding others towards this unifying aim. A good leader would therefore be someone with the ability to inspire people to action, someone who knows how to influence others to help achieve their desired future.**

Central to this definition and my beliefs on leadership is the concept that **it is better to influence than to control.** Trump's knee-jerk reaction to opposition is usually litigation; this is a perfect example of control. This tactic doesn't change people's minds, it's simply a use of brute force to make the world accept his reality. So, if that's an example of control, what

is influence: and how should leaders use it in business?

At its very core, **influence is about building and maintaining great relationships with people.** It may sound a bit wishy-washy, but **having strong bonds with people is what allows a leader to make big requests of them in order to achieve the desired vision.** This approach elicits real commitments as opposed to mere compliance with the leader's demands: a much healthier situation, one which is likely to lead to higher levels of engagement and motivation.

With this in mind, it's incredibly important not to attempt to build a relationship with someone for the sole reason of influencing them towards your own ambitions: this is an inherently manipulative behaviour which most people will see right through. **It's impossible to develop a truly great relationship with someone without first taking a genuine interest in them, so time must be spent doing so to establish some common ground.** While this all might sound fairly obvious, in my experience it's far trickier than it sounds! Spending more time talking than listening is a comfortable yet dangerous habit to fall into; it's vital to allow other viewpoints their allotted stage time too. The late Stephen Covey put it perfectly: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

The other critical dimension of influence is respect, something which is lost far more easily than it's earned! In their excellent research piece on the subject of leadership, Rob Goffee and

Gareth Jones<sup>1</sup> posed the thought-provoking question: "Why should anyone be led by you?"

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Much of their research is focused on the "followers": people whose hearts and minds need to be captured if one is to be considered worthy to lead. A budding leader is unlikely to evoke this sort of response from people if he/she isn't respected by them. Goffee and Jones found that the following skills were attractive to potential followers, the absence of which made gaining respect somewhat of an uphill battle:

- **Reveal your weaknesses** – Make sure people know you're human!
- **Become a sensor** – Lay the foundations for instinctive decision-making.
- **Practice "tough empathy"** – Find the perfect middle ground.
- **Dare to be different** – Capitalise on your uniqueness.

*1 Rob Goffee is Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School, Gareth Jones is a Visiting Professor at the IE Business School in Madrid. They have worked together for many years with a focus on leadership, producing a number of articles and books, many of which have featured prominently in the Harvard Business Review.*

## Reveal your weaknesses

As I've mentioned before, a key part of influence is having strong relationships with people, and **it's difficult to connect with someone who presents themselves as perfect in every way.** Aside from this, someone who is omni capable shouldn't need any help achieving their vision: so why bother trying to? Outside the confines of a dictatorship, **a supposedly flawless leader simply comes across as conceited or insecure; truly great leaders can use their flaws as strengths, revealing their approachability and humanity.** There have been no shortage of jokes and negative comments made about President Donald Trump in recent months, and his often furious responses portray him as someone incapable of accepting his shortcomings. It's worth mentioning that this point doesn't mean it's wise to admit to a flaw that undermines everything you do as a leader: i.e. if you're a CFO with an inability to deal with numbers. Perhaps the solution in that situation would be to find a more suitable line of work!

## Become a sensor

A crucial habit of successful leaders is remaining in tune with what's going on around them, something which is essential to be able to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions. **Oftentimes the right decisions aren't always obvious, so much of leadership involves relying on intuition. This sense can be honed through the collecting of subtle interpersonal cues. Good leaders always have their fingers on the pulse: great leaders also know to use**

**their trusted colleagues to help them with this.** This is an area which Trump excels in, as evidenced by how successfully he tapped into a frustrated, anti-establishment undercurrent in the psyche of the American people during his campaign.

## Practice "tough empathy"

It can be a challenge to reconcile between being a leader that pushes their followers to achieve their best whilst also being one that empathises with them: but it's a balance that must be found to be truly successful. **A leader should care passionately about the people they lead, but should also be careful to only give them what they need to achieve their best, rather than what they want.** No-one could argue that Trump doesn't appear passionate about the people he now leads, and he certainly is keen to exhibit a tough demeanour: but that doesn't mean he ticks the right boxes in this area. His problem here lies in his tendency to offer overly-simplistic solutions to extremely complex problems. His suggestion to ban Muslims from entering the US after the San Bernardino attack appealed to many of the people who would eventually win him the election, and perhaps things might have played out differently had he not simply resorted to saying what those people wanted to hear.

## Dare to be different

This might sound like it contradicts some of the previous points, but it's important to create some sort of separateness between leaders and followers. Qualities

like imagination, expertise, and adventure can be used to demonstrate a difference; even your image could do the trick. As with “tough empathy”, there’s a fine line to be trod here. **Followers tend not to want their leaders to be exactly the same as them, but it potentially could be risky to place yourself on too lofty a pedestal to achieve this.** The ability to be a good sensor and to empathise with colleagues can be lost with too much distance, and it’s hard to imagine a larger distance than the one between a multi-billionaire president and many of the economically disadvantaged voters whose views he represents.

“You don’t have to know how to do everyone else’s jobs better than they can!”

The final essential factor of influence is the leader’s knowledge and expertise about their job. Key here is that you don’t have to know how to do everyone else’s jobs better than they can! **It doesn’t hurt to know about what your colleagues are doing, but they won’t feel like the experts they should be if they’re constantly being told how to fulfil their role. A leader’s job is to help their colleagues see the bigger picture: to join the dots, assist them in their journey with the organisation, and ultimately to achieve the vision.** If you’re interested in learning more about this concept, I’d thoroughly recommend “Turn the Ship Around!” by David Marquet; the book gives an amazing account of his efforts to turn his

colleagues from blind followers into active leaders. I credit him for introducing me to the idea that asking questions shouldn’t always be about trying to test someone or catch them out: you should simply be trying to satisfy your curiosity. A curious approach to dealing with colleagues will always foster greater respect than an interrogative one.

So where does this leave us? I suppose the best way to sum up what I’m trying to say here is this: there’s a lot more to leadership than purely being skilled at giving orders. **The kind of leader I hope people would aspire to be should know how to properly exercise influence over others, but in an ethical fashion which allows them to achieve their own personal desires as well as those of the organisation.** The formula for attaining this kind of influence is having mutually respectful relationships with the people you work with, which can be accomplished using the techniques and mindsets proposed by Goffee and Jones – plus a little bit of expertise in what a leader’s job is and isn’t.

In conclusion, the art of being a great leader is deeply entwined with knowing how to exert influence. Nobody can deny that Trump has successfully influenced a large proportion of the American people, however his method of achieving this was far removed from what I see as true leadership. But regardless of what I think, Donald Trump is the 45th president of the United States, and the optimist in me doesn’t want to completely deny the prospect that he might do a good job. After all, he’s put together the wealthiest cabinet the country has ever been run by; perhaps his style of business-like

bullying will be something they're used to, and he'll be able to keep them in check.

It's almost impossible to judge how well any one person would adapt to a job as varied and demanding as the one Trump has taken on, but I worry about the capability of someone who rose to power through fear-mongering and political chest-beating. We view the world of politics through an increasingly blurred lens these days, and unfortunately many leaders are defined by controversies rather than by their skills. In my mind, **a good leader is someone who listens to, engages with, and supports others** – but picking one out from the crowd is, sadly, easier said than done. Even more concerning is the rise of populist rabble-rousers that would threaten to drown out this kind of leader completely: a trend that we would do well to keep a close eye on.

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## About the authors



### Michael Baker

Michael Baker is an experienced management development consultant and director of the TBC. He has spent the last 15 years sharing his expertise with an array of high-end clients, such as AXA, LloydsTSB, and Rhondda Cynon Taff Council.



### Jamie Drummond

Jamie Drummond has worked with Michael for over four years in a few different companies including the TBC. He is currently based abroad in Germany, but has remained in touch with Michael in order to collaborate on a series of articles and publications.