

recently attended a breakfast seminar hosted by a leading financial services firm and a world-class business school. The speaker asked what constitutes great leadership and it wasn't long before Winston Churchill got a mention. Another, much younger, participant later asked what one does about people who don't have 'natural' leadership qualities?

How many of us have been to these kinds of leadership events, when somebody mentions Winston Churchill and others talk about 'natural' leaders? Winston Churchill died in 1965 and, from many contemporary accounts, did not appear to possess what some might describe as natural leadership qualities. He is, however, frequently excused for this apparent deficiency by allusions to 'situational' leadership.

Although ideas about post-heroic leadership are increasingly discussed, along with the value of sharing the functions of leadership and distributed leadership, we still seem reluctant to relinquish notions of heroic leaders and innate leadership ability. Why is that?

Many of us have grown up with a traditional view of leadership that is dominated by the idea that leadership is something exercised by a single person – a leader who inspires followers. When times are threatening and uncertain, the idea of a leader who both saves and protects is both compelling and seductive.

Unfortunately, however, recent research published by Oxford University researcher Dr Kevin Dutton reveals that the role of CEO is a natural draw for psychopathic individuals. This is because it presents them with a ready-made opportunity to control and manipulate other people. Lord David Owen also examined the behaviour of successful politicians and identified the 'hubris syndrome', a

Busting the hero myth

There is no such thing as a natural leader

By
Kate Cooper



leaning towards profound overconfidence. He claimed this came from the possession of power, particularly when an individual experienced success. Other research has associated CEOs with high levels of narcissism. Indeed, organisations would seem to be a breeding ground for narcissists, psychopaths and sufferers of hubris syndrome.

Narcissistic, psychopathic or hubristic leaders might be defined in different ways, but they all share a strong sense of their own individuality, often because they consider themselves to be 'better' than others – true heroes. Our continued focus on the individual, whether it is the inclusion of Winston Churchill in discussions about great leaders, or our reluctance to let go of the idea of a leadership gene, prevents us from moving into a post-heroic period.

LEADING AN ORGANISATION TODAY CANNOT BE A SOLITARY PURSUIT

My role at the Institute provides me with opportunities to talk to many people who are grappling with the problem of reconciling the dominant discourse of heroic leadership with the everyday reality of work. This reality involves complex organisations facing an unknown future, which requires a different kind of leadership. Leading an organisation today cannot be a solitary pursuit; organisations are just too complicated, interconnected and volatile. We need more than a single heroic leader at the helm, even if that leader happens to be altruistic, empathetic and humble. ■

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