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## Leadership

# Travis Kalanick goes back to the classroom

The \$50bn leadership industry may not have much to teach disruptive Uber founder

**Andrew Hill**



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“Children, we have a new member of class this term. Please say hello to Travis, who has joined us from [Uber](https://www.ft.com/topics/organisations/Uber) (<https://www.ft.com/topics/organisations/Uber>). Travis, welcome to Leadership 101. I’m sure you’ll be very happy here.”

[Caught by a dashboard camera](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTEDYCKNqns) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTEDYCKNqns>) arguing with an Uber driver, Travis Kalanick, the founder and chief executive of the ride-hailing service, this week apologised and [told staff](http://next.ft.com/content/ff927e44-fe14-11e6-96f8-3700c5664d30) (<http://next.ft.com/content/ff927e44-fe14-11e6-96f8-3700c5664d30>): “This is the first time I’ve been willing to admit that I need leadership help and I intend to get it.”

He will have plenty of helpers to choose from. The leadership industry is vast. Harvard's Barbara Kellerman estimated in 2012 that well over \$50bn annually was spent on leadership development, from the smallest coaching corner shop to the biggest business school. An Amazon search returns nearly 200,000 books on the topic (including [mine \(https://www.amazon.com/Leadership-Headlines-Insider-insights-leaders/dp/129211276X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1488393492&sr=1-1&keywords=leadership+in+the+headlines\)](https://www.amazon.com/Leadership-Headlines-Insider-insights-leaders/dp/129211276X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1488393492&sr=1-1&keywords=leadership+in+the+headlines)). Despite this, as Jeffrey Pfeffer pointed out in his uncompromising 2015 attack on the sector, *Leadership BS* (<https://ig.ft.com/sites/business-book-award/books/2015/longlist/leadership-bs-by-jeffrey-pfeffer>), there is still “overwhelming evidence of workplaces filled with disengaged, dissatisfied employees who do not trust their leaders”.

So as well as giving Uber's founder the chance to atone, “educating Travis” would also offer the engorged and often ineffectual leadership industry an opportunity to redeem itself. Take an aggressive 40-year-old executive, who continues to behave like the “scrappy, small entrepreneur (<http://next.ft.com/content/b4bf8508-ad29-11e4-a5c1-00144feab7de>)” he says he once was, and turn him into a leader that even Uber's most disgruntled drivers can be proud of.

It is a task worthy of Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, who sought to pass off foul-mouthed flower girl Eliza Doolittle as a duchess. But, like Higgins's challenge, the quest is strewn with obstacles.

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First, there is the intractable would-be student himself. As a role model for life-long learning, Mr Kalanick falls short. Despite repeated efforts to [polish the founder's rough edges \(http://next.ft.com/content/3549e246-e0e8-35fo-8f1b-5378148181d0\)](http://next.ft.com/content/3549e246-e0e8-35fo-8f1b-5378148181d0), Uber controversies keep coming. Last month brought to light not only the awkward video, but a potentially far more damaging claim by a female former engineer that Uber's human resources team had ignored her [allegations of sexual harassment \(http://next.ft.com/content/7b17c860-f71e-11e6-9516-2d969eod3b65\)](http://next.ft.com/content/7b17c860-f71e-11e6-9516-2d969eod3b65).



Then there is the question of whether Mr Kalanick has already outgrown formal education. Most universities so worship entrepreneurs that they are more likely to be welcomed as guest lecturers or badgered for funding than admitted as students. Meanwhile,

aspiring MBAs dream of out-disrupting Uber's creators, not sitting alongside them in remedial [leadership](https://www.ft.com/topics/themes/Leadership) classes.

Finally, there is the question of whether teaching Uber's leader how to lead would take the kick out of Mr Kalanick — the hard-charging attitude that helped him make his fortune in the first place — just as Higgins neutered Eliza's winning charm.

Still, something must be done. Uber's problems have emerged from [its dog-eat-dog culture](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/technology/uber-workplace-culture.html?smid=tw-share&_r=2), and culture — as many of those 200,000 leadership manuals will tell you — comes from the top. The Institute of Leadership & Management [polled 1,200 UK workers](https://www.institutelm.com/resourceLibrary/how-do-we-understand-authentic-leadership.html) recently: half agreed their leaders sometimes or frequently allowed their mood to dictate the climate of the workplace. The institute, incidentally, is one of many professional associations Mr Kalanick could join, rising to become a "Fellow", with the right to put "FInstLM" after his name.

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It seems more likely the Uber founder will seek one-on-one advice. I would counsel him against over-paying for his own management guru, however.

Asked what Mr Kalanick should do, one business school professor suggests he should in future "stop, challenge and choose": stop to think, challenge what he knows about the situation (and what he may not know — that dashboard camera) and choose the right response.



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It is a fine, simple prescription, based on common sense — and that should be no surprise.

For all the cash companies spend on training and the lifetimes academics devote to forging new theories, often the leadership industry peddles to leaders the advice and values most of

us absorbed in nursery school.

For Mr Kalanick, in other words, it is probably already too late.

“Children, just a reminder before we start the class: no fighting, ‘indoor voices’ only, and please wait until break-time before eating your humble pie. Travis . . . Travis! [Don’t do that](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_4IgwO4MoM) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_4IgwO4MoM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_4IgwO4MoM)).”

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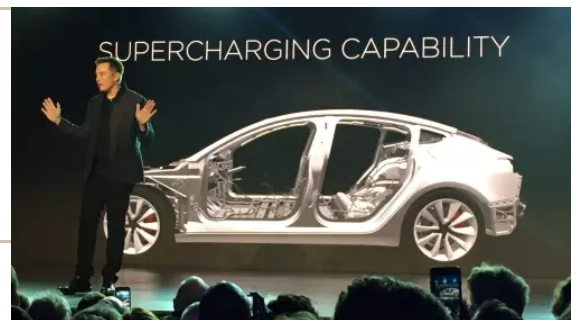
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