

The end of Superheroes, it's time to let ordinary heroes take charge

New book calls for more realistic, less idealistic view of leadership

A call to abandon some of the folklore about leaders and get back to reality is contained in a new book - *Living Leadership, A Practical Guide for Ordinary Heroes*. The book is based on a four-year study in which researchers from the business school at Ashridge and France's HEC lived alongside leaders and followers in organisations across Europe. It identifies a pattern of "high anxiety" leaders pushing for results and change and ending up with exactly what they fear: compliance and not commitment, stagnation and not change.

Comment authors Gerhard Wilke, George Binney and Colin Williams: "What shocked us was how often, in business, government or public service, in many different countries, we experienced the same pattern. Leaders often seemed weighed down by the expectations placed on them. They felt under pressure to re-invent their organisations. They got caught up in a vicious cycle of promising too much, pushing for change and then dealing with subordinates like naughty children when results did not match expectations."

"Companies and organisations are still half in love with the transformational view of leaders. We found a pre-occupation with strategy and change, an idea that was often taken for granted that leaders should be strong enough to transform the performance and culture of their organisations. Older, wiser ideas about the importance of context and the limits of individual action often got lost."

"Leaders were effective when they broke out of the vicious cycle and were able to connect to people around them and get real about objectives and plans. The key was when leaders could hold together *what is* and *what should be*. They didn't give up on their dreams but looked reality in the face and thought pragmatically about how to move towards their aspirations. They gave up the idea that they could transform their organisations at will and discovered the capacity to be 'ordinary heroes', moving forward one step at a time."

The book spells out the distinctive aspects of *Living Leadership* that emerged from the research:

- **Re-negotiating expectations.** Often leaders did not have clear objectives to work to and had to negotiate and re-negotiate realistic expectations. This was at odds with much of the classic literature about "management by objectives".
- **"Healthy selfishness".** Leaders needed to consider their own needs and not get swept up in the expectations of others if they were to be in good enough shape to lead others.
- **Trading with people.** Effective leaders avoided getting locked in patterns of "them and us" and were prepared to accept interdependence with a range of other people, particularly the executive groups around them.
- **Tackling "the elephant in the room".** Often there were one or two critical issues that were blocking progress. Groups were aware of these issues but no one dared name them. An important role for leaders was to put these issues on the table.
- **Nudging strategy forward.** In the research, grand visions and plans always ended in frustration. The challenge was how to "nudge strategy forward", taking the real, implicit direction of an organisation and seeing how to influence it over a period.
- **Being part of organisational change.** Leaders were successful when they accepted they were "in the middle" of change, not apart and doing it to others.
- **Inner demons.** It was the imperfections that made leaders interesting and gave them their unique value. Leaders had inner demons, which were the source of their

strengths and of their potential weaknesses. The challenge was to "become the leaders they could be, not the one others thought they should be."

'Living Leadership, A Practical Guide for Ordinary Heroes', by George Binney, Gerhard Wilke and Colin Williams, is published by FT Prentice Hall.

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