
A Kantian theory of leadership

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Abstract

Uses Kant's moral philosophy to provide a normative theory of leadership. First shows how Kant's philosophy would reject instrumental theories of leadership and most charismatic theories of leadership. Perhaps somewhat more surprisingly, it questions some of the assumptions of servant leadership and puts constraints on transformational leadership and the leader as educator. The central concept of Kant's moral philosophy is the dignity given to autonomy. Thus a good leader ought to respect and enrich the autonomy of followers. The Kantian leader turns followers into leaders.

One might think that a Kantian theory of leadership is as much an oxymoron as business ethics itself. After all, it is a conceptual truth that a leader must have followers. Moreover, people tend to think that a follower is of lesser rank than a leader. For many the term "leader" has hierarchical and even élitist connotations. Kant's moral philosophy, on the other hand, is basically egalitarian. It is Kant who provides the intellectual justification for the respect for persons principle. Kant points out that each person thinks of himself or herself as a rational creature who is entitled to dignity and respect. Consistency then requires that each person recognize the rational nature of other persons and thus recognize that other persons are also entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. This is why Kant argues that one cannot use another as a means merely. In yet another formulation of the categorical imperative Kant argues that in a community or organization we are bound by rules but by rules that we ourselves would accept as rational legislators. Thus in such communities, which Kant calls kingdoms of ends, the members are all equally subject and sovereign. Given these egalitarian commitments, how can Kant provide a theory of leadership when "leadership" has connotations of élitism and hierarchy? Suggesting a way out of this dilemma is the subject of this paper.

Section I. What leadership is not

First, it should be pointed out that leaders need not violate the respect for persons formulation of the categorical imperative. Leaders need not use followers as means to their own ends. The fact that many leaders do behave in that way cannot count against the normative claim that they ought not to

behave in that way. As a matter of logic this point is certainly correct. However, I must admit that there are many temptations in business life to use followers as means. In finance capitalism and under the influence of Wall Street, the leaders of publicly held firms are under great pressure to increase the "value" of the firm, i.e. to increase the stock price and hence shareholder wealth. With such pressure on contemporary managers it is hard to avoid using the other corporate stakeholders as a mere means for the ends of the stockholders.

Despite the temptation, competitive pressures may not provide even a prudent basis for using stakeholders as a means to stockholder profits and unsophisticated versions of finance capitalism that argue the contrary have not gone unchallenged on this point. Aggressive attempts to subordinate the interests of employees, customers, and suppliers to achieve greater financial returns can be self-defeating. As critics of Al Dunlop's management philosophy point out, there is considerable empirical evidence that companies that also address the interests of employees, customers, suppliers, and the local communities in which they do business have better financial returns than those that do not. This thesis is articulated in books such as *Built to Last*, (Collins and Porras, 1994); *The Loyalty Effect* (Reichheld, 1996), and *The Human Equation* (Pfeffer, 1998). Defenders of this thesis endorse a number of enlightened management practices such as quality circles, teamwork, participative management, and empowerment. However, the adoption of such enlightened management practices does not resolve the issue for the Kantian. If the motivation for adopting such techniques were simply to increase shareholder wealth, then the adoption of such practices would not be genuinely moral acts. Such actions would not result from a good will. They would not be done out of duty but rather would be done out of prudence. They have no more moral value



than the act of truth telling on the part of the shopkeeper, in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1963), who is honest in order to maintain his reputation[1]. Thus a Kantian can agree with Joanne Ciulla when she refers to such enlightened management techniques as “bogus empowerment” (Ciulla, 1998). If leadership involves the adoption of such enlightened management practices, and I will argue that it does, then such practices must not be implemented simply to raise profits for stockholders. Otherwise they use people as means and are, from the moral point of view, merely bogus.

The fact that a Kantian leader must act from a moral motive means that he or she cannot adopt a purely instrumental philosophy? A Kantian cannot take advice on how to be a good leader from Machiavelli. For Machiavelli the sole purpose of leadership is power. The leader seeks to maintain his power and *The Prince* can be considered a handbook for staying in power. Should a leader be kind or cruel? The only way to answer that question from Machiavelli’s perspective is to ask whether cruelty or kindness will enable the leader to maintain power. As one might expect the answer will vary according to the situation.

It seems obvious that a Kantian cannot take an instrumental view of leadership. The reason for that is because an instrumental view requires that we use the most efficient means necessary to achieve the end. Now an instrumental view would require us to use people merely as a means if the end required it. But that is not permitted on Kantian moral theory and for Kant the moral point of view trumps all other points of view. We are not permitted to use immoral means to achieve our ends.

This conclusion has interesting results. If leadership theorists were asked to identify persons who were called leaders who subscribed to an instrumental view, two names would be prominent. Henry Kissinger would be the chief example from the world of politics and Jack Welch the CEO of General Electric might well be the chief example from the world of business. Kissinger has been prominently identified as a realist in political affairs so I think the attribution to Kissinger is indeed fair. The attribution to Welch may require a bit of explanation. In his early days at General Electric Welch’s aim was to increase shareholder value. To do that he believed that each division at General Electric had to be first or second in its class. Otherwise it should be shut down. Welch also established strict financial goals for his managers and he expected managers to meet

those goals or forfeit their positions. Welch was considered a demanding boss and was prominently listed on Fortune’s list of the most difficult bosses to work for. He certainly appeared to use subordinates, if not solely as a means for his own end, then solely as a means to increase the wealth of GE shareholders (and at that Welch has certainly been successful). However, Welch would be disqualified as a leader in Kant’s sense on those grounds alone. However in the mid-1990s, Welch discovered the human relations function and enlightened management techniques. He no longer believed that being characterized as one of the most difficult bosses to work for was the best way to contribute to the bottom line. Did Jack Welch become a Kantian leader in the 1990s? I think a Kantian would have to say he did not. It is reported that Welch was asked if he would give up his enlightened management techniques if he thought that they were no longer the most efficient way to contribute to the bottom line. He said he would. Welch’s management techniques were purely instrumental. If using enlightened human resource techniques contributed to the bottom line, he would use them. If they did not, he would not. But in either case it seems fair to say that subordinates were used solely as a means to contribute to the bottom line. Welch used people as a means whether he was one of the most difficult bosses or not. For that reason a Kantian could not consider Welch a true leader despite the fact that almost everyone in the management field does. A Kantian theory of leadership is not without bite.

A characteristic frequently associated with leadership is charisma[2]. Charisma is defined as “a rare personal quality of leaders who arouse fervent popular devotion and enthusiasm”. It is also defined as “personal magnetism or charm”. As one can see from the definition, charisma is a quality that elicits powerful emotional responses in followers. A Kantian should be especially nervous about charisma. First, a Kantian requires moral actions to be the result of autonomous choices and an action cannot be an autonomous choice if it is merely an emotional response and nothing more. Such an action would be heteronomous rather than autonomous. Second, a necessary condition for a moral action according to Kant is that it be consistent with reason. By that I mean that the action must be based on a maxim that can be universally endorsed and followed. Otherwise the action is in violation of the first formulation of the categorical imperative. When a leader uses charisma to get his or her followers to act, it

seems as if the response of the followers is merely emotional. Their action might be consistent with principles that could be rationally adopted universally, but their rationality would be purely accidental. Thus even when the charismatic leader whips up his or her followers in a frenzy for an acknowledged good action, neither the followers nor the leader are behaving morally in a Kantian sense. It must also be pointed out that the charismatic leader may not use his or her charismatic quality for good ends. Followers respond to charismatic leaders who endorse the most vicious and immoral actions. This is the so-called Hitler problem (see Ciulla, 1998). For Kant, charisma is neither a necessary or sufficient condition for leadership. Moreover, on balance charisma is dangerous because it motivates followers to act on non-rational grounds rather than rational ones. Do not look for charisma in a Kantian theory of leadership.

In passing it should be noted that even some of those who allow emotion into ethical judgment share the concerns of Kantians with charismatic leadership. For example, Robert Solomon, who defines leadership as “an emotional relationship of trust”, is critical of charismatic leadership (Solomon, 1998).

Perhaps a Kantian would endorse a theory of leadership that specifically eschews the notion that the leader is somehow superior to his or her followers. Servant leadership is one such theory. The chief intellectual spokesperson for servant leadership is Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf begins his classic text by indicating that the idea for servant leadership came from reading Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East*. In that book, the central figure Leo turns out to be a leader, because, although he does menial chores, only Leo can make it possible for the group to conclude its journey. Greenleaf then goes on to say:

But to me, this story clearly says that the great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness. Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, deep down inside. Leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant. It was something given or assumed that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, that could be taken away. He was servant first.

The notion of servant leadership has become a classic in leadership literature. Greenleaf went on to establish a center, the Greenleaf Servant Leadership Center, and in 1998 he published a follow-up book entitled *The*

Power of Servant Leadership. That book won endorsement from many of the great names in leadership including Max DePree, Peter Senge, Margaret J. Wheatley, Warren Bennis, and Frances Hesselbein.

What would Kant’s position be on servant leadership? Certainly, the servant leader would not merely use followers to achieve his or her own ends. That, in this form of leadership at least, is a conceptual truth. But, despite this, I do not think that Kant would be on the list of endorsees. Given the emphasis on autonomy in Kant’s philosophy and given the connotations of the word “servant”, I think we must make sure that the servant leader is not allowing himself or herself to be used as merely a means to the goals of those he or she serves. Kant would no more permit an agent to use himself or herself as a means merely than he would allow one to merely use another. That an agent cannot use himself or herself as a means is part of the point of at least two of the four examples in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1990). Kant argues that it is immoral for a person to commit suicide or to fail to develop his or her talents. With respect to suicide Kant says, “man, however, is not a thing, and thus not something to be used merely as a means; he must always be regarded in all his actions as an end in himself. Therefore I cannot dispose of man in my own person so as to mutilate, corrupt or kill him”. His comments about the obligation not to waste one’s talents are more indirect with respect to not using oneself as a means. He points out in his discussion that it is not enough that our actions not conflict with persons as rational agents; our actions must also harmonize with persons as ends as well. And failure to develop one’s talents will not harmonize with one’s nature as a rational end. Finally, Kant specifically rejects the notion of servility as an acceptable stance for any person-leader or otherwise.

A low opinion of oneself in relation to others is no humility; it is a sign of a little spirit and of a servile character. To flatter oneself that this is a virtue is to mistake an imitation for the genuine article; it is a monk’s virtue and not at all natural; this form of humility is in fact a form of pride. There is nothing unjust or unreasonable in self-esteem (Kant, 1963).

Now it can be plausibly argued Greenleaf’s account of servant leadership is not servile in Kant’s sense. As we shall see there are many passages in Greenleaf that would fit with a Kantian theory of leadership. Moreover, even if the classical formulations were servile in tone, a theory of servant leadership can be developed that is not servile. However, a review of the Greenleaf quotation above

certainly seems to endorse the servility as a virtue. That aspect of Greenleaf's view of servant leadership would not be acceptable to Kant.

One of the best known theories of leadership is that leaders are transformational. Its leading exponent is James MacGregor Burns. Burns begins by distinguishing transformational leadership from the more typically practiced transactional leadership. Transactional leadership occurs when one person (the leader) sees possibilities for exchange. Thus the "transactional leader approaches followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another: jobs for votes or subsidies for campaign contributions". Burns notes that the exchanges under transactional leadership can be economic, political or psychological in nature (Burns, 1978). Now the mere fact that a relationship is one of mutual exchange initiated by the transactional leader does not mean that the transactional leader uses the other person or persons in the exchange as a means merely. He or she may but need not. However, the Kantian would be in agreement with Burns who finds transactional leadership anemic. Transactional leadership may not use a person as a means but it does not respect a person either. There is no concern with the development of the follower as an autonomous, rational, responsible person.

Transformational leadership which Burns defines in one place as a "relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents" (1978, p. 5) is very different. Under transformational leadership the follower (and the leader) are changed for the better. Burns argues that transformational leadership is not based simply on power or authority (although Burns clearly recognizes that conflict and power have a role to play in the dynamics of leadership). Leaders do induce followers to act for certain goals, but these goals "... represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both the leaders and followers" (p. 19). Leadership seeks to elevate the consciousness of followers. It does this by operating at need and value levels higher than those of the followers and by exploiting conflict and tensions within followers' value structures (p. 42). Burns had been strongly influenced by Lawrence Kohlberg and the moral development school (pp. 42, 46). Thus another way to characterize transformational leadership is to say that it raises the moral development of followers to a higher level on Kohlberg's scale. How is

this achieved? Burns clearly rejects indoctrination. It succeeds by appealing to higher values. Followers realize they can become better than they are. For example in cases where values conflict, one of the tasks of the leader is to mediate that value conflict. To do that the leader appeals to "more widely and deeply held values, such as justice, liberty, and brotherhood" (p. 43).

To what extent would Kant endorse transformational leadership? There are many aspects of transformational leadership that would appeal to a Kantian. A Kantian would endorse the respect that is given to the needs and values of followers and as we shall see a Kantian would find the notion that leaders turn followers into leaders an especially desirable feature of leadership. The concerns would focus on how the transformation to higher values takes place. Burns' rejection of indoctrination would earn high marks. However, some commentators remain concerned about whether transformational leadership is sufficiently respectful of the autonomy of the followers. So much depends on how the transformation takes place.

Michael Keeley has expressed an important concern regarding transformational leadership (Keeley, 1995). There is a danger that the unity of purpose will be achieved by silencing the voices of a minority. Drawing on the political philosophy of James Madison, Keeley argues that transformational leadership can in effect turn into the tyranny of the majority. Keeley says:

The conclusion drawn by Madison is a flat-out repudiation of transformational leadership ... unless leaders are able to transform everyone and create absolute unanimity of interests (a very special case), transformational leadership produces simply a majority will that represents the interests of the strongest faction. Sometimes that will is on the side of the good – as in Ghandi's case. Sometimes it is on the side of evil – as in Hitler's case. In any case, might is an arbitrary guide to right, as Madison clearly understood (1995, p. 77).

A Kantian theory of leadership will insist on more participation on the part of the followers and will be more protective of the interests of dissenting voices. The Kantian leader is not so naïve as to believe that there can be unanimity regarding all the decisions that an organization makes, but the rules that govern decision-making should be rules that everyone living under them has had a hand in making and can endorse. As Kant says one ought to act as if one were a member of a kingdom of ends in which one were both subject and sovereign at the same time. If

there is a common purpose, it must be arrived at by rules or principles which are both rational and which have the support of those who must live under them. Transformational leadership must be constrained in that way if it is to be endorsed by the Kantian leader.

Finally some have argued that the leader is primarily an educator. How would Kant respond to that? As Newton points out, education can take place in two ways: some educators try to impose the correct beliefs and values in students. Others think education involves getting students to think for themselves (Newton, 1985). In this vein Newton is following Burns who points out that students should not be used instrumentally nor coerced, but should be treated as joint seekers after truth (Burns, 1978). But what is so valuable about thinking for oneself? I think the answer to that is that learning to think for oneself is one of the fundamental ways of exercising one's autonomy. Thinking for oneself is important because autonomy is important. Education contributes to the development of autonomy. But it also should contribute to the development of personal responsibility. That personal responsibility is played out in one's community. In fact many have argued that the liberal arts education is designed to prepare one for leadership. So education prepares one for leadership and the leader, on this view, is an educator. Again a Kantian would find much to accept from those who argue that a leader is an educator so long as the guiding philosophy of education was the support and development of individual autonomy. After all it is autonomy that gives persons a dignity that is without price. Indeed respect for the autonomy of persons is, I shall argue, the chief building block for a positive theory of leadership. But what of content? What is it that the educator leader teaches? I shall argue in the next section that the educator leader teaches followers to be leaders. Thus I shall argue that a Kantian leader is a teacher who enhances the autonomy of followers by teaching them to be leaders.

Section II. what leadership is: a Kantian theory

In this section I defend the claim that Kantian leadership supports the development of autonomy both in his or her followers as well as in himself or herself. The implementation of such a view requires that the leader turn followers into leaders. In other words the leader transforms the

relationships in an organization so that those who had been followers could now be considered leaders.

Thus far the Kantian theory of leadership I have presented has been negative. I have shown that certain well-received views of leadership are not acceptable on Kantian grounds. Prominent among these failed views are charismatic leadership, servant leadership, and instrumental leadership. Theories of transformational leadership and the leader as teacher have proved more promising, but only if constrained by certain features of Kant's moral philosophy. However, I think a Kantian theory of leadership is more robust than standard transformational or leader as teacher theories. I believe that Kantian moral theory provides the tools to construct a positive theory of leadership that shares many features with transformational leadership and with the model of the leader as a teacher but that is unique in its own right.

I propose that the kingdom of ends formulation of the categorical imperative is the key to a positive theory of leadership just as the second formulation was the key for a negative theory (a theory of telling us what leadership is not). The kingdom of ends formulation asserts that "One should act as if one were a member of an ideal kingdom of ends in which one was subject and sovereign at the same time". Kant recognized that human beings interacted with other human beings (ends). Thus the arena of interaction was called a "kingdom of ends". A business organization, like any other organization, is composed of individual persons and since persons are moral creatures, the interactions of persons in an organization are moral interactions and thus are subject to moral law. On Kant's view a business relationship cannot be simply economic; business interactions are interactions among persons and thus they are always subject to morality as well. And as we have seen the relation between leaders and followers cannot simply be transactional.

What are the laws, which govern those interactions? Kant maintained that since those interactions were the interactions of human beings and not billiard balls, laws made by human beings themselves should govern them. Thus the laws should reflect the fact that the members of the organization are autonomous and rational in the practical sense. The laws that govern the interactions of persons should be self-legislated. Of course those laws ought to be consistent with the requirements of morality as spelled out in the first two formulations of the categorical imperative. Thus the laws must be capable of

being universally applied and respect the humanity in a person as an end rather than as a means merely.

Subjection to moral law equally applies when the interaction is within an organization including business organizations. Leaders interact with followers and thus these interactions are subject to moral rules. From the negative point of view or in the sense of things forbidden, leadership interactions cannot violate the categorical imperative. But interactions between leaders and followers need more guiding norms than that. The third formulation of the categorical imperative provides the moral requirement for adopting these other norms. It provides a positive view of what the norms governing a kingdom of ends should be. Basically it says these norms cannot be simply imposed on the basis of power or superiority of position. The norm must be the kind of norm that could in principle receive the assent of all rational moral beings. Thus there is a sense in which the norms that govern an organization must be acceptable to all. That is what it means to say that all individuals including leaders and followers are both subject and sovereign with respect to the norms that govern them.

The third formulation acts as a significant restraint on leadership as it is traditionally understood. Many think of the leader as the boss – as the person who makes the decisions. A Kantian does not accept that view. To be consistent with the kingdom of ends formulation of the categorical imperative, the leader is a decision proposer rather than a decision imposer. The leader in an organization can propose ends as well as means for reaching those ends. He or she can propose decision-making rules as well. But the leader should not order these things or impose them on the basis of his or her power. In management terms the leader creates the conditions for participative management. In less scholarly terminology, the Kantian leader gets buy-in. But the buy-in is not based on charisma. Neither is it based on power or position. Rather it is based on the merits of the proposal. The rules that govern human interactions should be rules that are acceptable to all.

But isn't participative management the abandonment of leadership? And even if it weren't, wouldn't such leadership lead to chaos. If you need universal buy-in for every decision that is made in an organization, you have anarchy and the organization will surely fail. That is certainly true, but universal buy-in is not required for every decision under a Kantian theory of

leadership. We need to distinguish among the following:

- 1 the individual decision, e.g. how many motors should we order,
- 2 the norm for making a decision, e.g. should that decision be left to the purchasing department; and
- 3 how should we decide how the norms in (2) should be made.

At a minimum I think a Kantian theory of leadership requires that the norms in (3) meet the conditions of the third formulation of the categorical imperative. Respecting a legislator in the kingdom of ends requires at least that much. Moreover, I think that as an ideal the Kantian leader should get assent for norms and decisions as often as possible and as far down into the organization as possible. The following principles may guide a leader as he or she attempts to transform an organization into a kingdom of ends:

- 1 The leader should consider the interests of all the affected stakeholders in any decision it makes.
- 2 The leader should have those affected by the firm's rules and policies participate in the determination of those rules and policies before they are implemented.
- 3 It should not be the case that the leader always gives the interests of one stakeholder group priority.
- 4 When a situation arises where it appears that the humanity of one set of stakeholders must be sacrificed for the humanity of another set of stakeholders, the leader cannot make the decision on the grounds that there is a greater number of people in one stakeholder group than in another.
- 5 Every leader must in cooperation with others in the organization establish procedures to ensure that relations among stakeholders are governed by rules of justice.

The first principle is a straightforward requirement that leaders take respect for persons seriously. The criterion says that leaders should take the moral point of view. Most philosophers agree that the moral point of view involves at least the commitment to take into account the interests of those affected by our actions. It seems to me that it is a principle that all rational persons would adopt.

The second principle provides a practical way for the leader to respect the autonomy of followers. Rather than simply give orders, the leader encourages followers to participate and thus the leader begins the transformation from mere followers, that is from followers who follow blindly, to persons

who can coordinate their goals and interests with others so that the objectives of the organization are obtained.

The third principle functions as a principle of legitimacy. It insures that all those involved in the firm receive some minimum benefit from being part of the organization. The principle reminds us that the task of the leader is not to use participants to achieve the greater good when those participants receive no benefit from the public good.

The fourth principle is an anti-utilitarian criterion and principle 5 ensures that where there is disagreement about the laws or norms that should govern an organization, the disagreement should be settled on grounds of justice. Principle 5 is a further check on authoritarian tendencies in leaders. Some believe that it is the task of the leader to resolve such disagreements. But not a Kantian. The Kantian leader assists in the resolution of disagreement, but he or she does not make the decision herself. To do so would violate the autonomy of the other members of the organization. It seems to me that these criteria for leadership could win universal assent and would meet Kant's requirement that they be norms to which all members of the community may be both subject and sovereign.

What I am really arguing is that the basis of a Kantian theory of leadership is autonomy. What should the relation of a Kantian leader to his or her followers be? The leader should enhance the autonomy of his or her followers. At the extreme the leader transforms followers into leaders. The leader drives leadership down through the organization by making people at lower levels in the hierarchy decision-maker leaders themselves rather than mere followers.

The Harvard Business School case, ABB's Relays Business, is often used as a case study for the development of the matrix organization but it can also be used as a case study for a Kantian theory of leadership. Here is how the case unfolds: the CEO of Asea Brown Boveri (ABB) is Percy Barnevik, the most cited non-American international business leader in American leadership literature. In this case, Barnevik is the person who exemplifies leadership. Yet after page two, Barnevik disappears and is never heard from again. However this HBR case is 12 pages long excluding appendices. If this case is about Barnevik's leadership, where is he? By page two, the actor on center stage is Goran Lindahl, Asea's executive vice-president. As the case unfolds, it is clear Barnevik has made Lindahl a leader. For example Lindahl is responsible for

communicating the new philosophy and principles including the guiding principle of decentralization. He also wanted to emphasize the importance of individual accountability. He delegated a series of tasks to managers at lower levels. By page six Lindahl disappears and Ulf Gundemark who becomes ABB's business head for the worldwide relay business is at the center of action. Leadership is being pushed down the organizational chart. A focal point event in the case centers on the allocation of export markets. The Swiss company had been given responsibility for coordinating sales into Mexico but a dispute arose concerning shortening the company's lines to its customers and minimizing the non-value added work in the system. Gundemark delegated this to a team of four marketing managers. After much negotiation they reported back to Gundemark that they could not reach a decision. Rather than make the decision himself, Gundemark sent them back for further discussion. Several days later after exhausting negotiations, they reported they had reached a majority decision of three to one. Gundemark wanted a unanimous decision and sent them back yet again. Finally after three more days of intense negotiation, the marketing team comes back with a unanimous recommendation. Talk about a decision where you are subject and sovereign at the same time. A Kantian leader, contrary to a popular stereotype, is not one to whom you look for a decision. The Kantian leader empowers others in the organization to take responsibility for making a decision. In so doing Barnevik, at least in part, exemplifies what it means to be a Kantian leader.

Yet another Kantian leader is Jan Carlzon former head of SAS airlines. When Carlzon took over as CEO of SAS, the company had lost its way and was floundering. He undertook a number of steps that brought popularity and thus profitability to the airline. A characteristic of his leadership style was to empower others in the organization to make decisions. One story in particular reflects Carlzon's leadership style. Carlzon realized he had not succeeded in providing adequate leadership for the company when he finally went on vacation. Throughout his vacation there were constant phone calls asking him to make a decision. Carlzon realized that he would only succeed when he went on vacation and no one called to seek his advice. His job as a leader was to encourage subordinates to make decisions on their own. In that way they increased their autonomy on the job. Eventually he went on vacation and no one called. Carlzon begins

his book *Moments of Truth* with the following quotations:

Everyone needs to know and feel that he is needed. Everyone wants to be treated as an individual. Giving someone the freedom to take responsibility releases resources that would otherwise remain concealed. An individual without information cannot take responsibility; an individual who is given information cannot help but take responsibility (Carlzon, 1987).

These two cases illustrate the central thesis of a Kantian theory of leadership. A central task of the leader is to respect and enhance the autonomy of followers. In many organizational contexts, especially in business, having the followers become leaders themselves enhances autonomy. The Kantian leader teaches followers to become leaders.

Does this type of leadership, which I identify as Kantian, have contemporary supporters in addition to Barnevik and Carlzon? Quite candidly my own research as well as my personal experience indicates that the number of enlightened leaders are few in number and that the number of genuine Kantian leaders are yet a rarer breed. Although many putative leaders and even leadership organizations that claim to teach leadership are hierarchical and authoritarian, there are some additional executives who speak like Kantian leaders. However, I acknowledge that some of those I quote are not Kantian leaders in the full sense. I should like to close this essay with some quotations from contemporary leadership authorities that sound like Kantians – at least some of the time!

The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving? Do they achieve the required results? Do they change with grace? Manage conflict? (DePree, 1989, p. 12). Two general themes ran through all our education and communication programmes when we set them up. The first was that information was power. Staff were constantly invited to challenge the rules, to question the status quo and things we took for granted, and never to accept that a manager, simply because he or she was a manager, necessarily knew better. We stressed the importance of the individual and the fact that we wanted to hear from everyone, no matter what their position in the organization. We were always saying to them: “tell us how we can make things better, how we can ennoble your lives, how we can make your spirits sing” (Roddick, 1991, p. 148).

First of all we are a democratic organization ... we are not authoritarian, autocratic or paternalistic ... here has to be delegation of

authority down the line... We endeavor to create an environment in which responsibility can be exercised effectively at all levels (Pillay, in Stewart, 1988).

A leadership that is concentrated on the ideas of one person is very limited. Genuine leadership involves getting all the wisdom that is available in a group come to a better decision than any one of its members would have been able to achieve himself (Miller, in Bollier, 1996, p. 302).

The “how to be” leader knows that people are the organization’s greatest asset and in a word, behavior, and relationships she or he demonstrates this powerful philosophy. The leader long ago banned the hierarchy and, involving many heads and hands, built a new kind of structure. The new design took people out of the boxes of the old hierarchy and moved them into a more circular, flexible, and fluid management system that spelled liberation of the human spirit and endeavor (Frances Hesselbein in Hesselbein *et. al.*, 1996, p. 122).

The leader of the future... will learn to care little about defending the traditional hierarchy. As a result, she or he will be willing to turn the pyramid upside down to implement a vision... Although it seems minor, this one change makes a major difference. The difference is between who is responsible and who is responsive. In the traditional pyramid, the boss is always responsible, and the subordinates are supposed to be responsive to the boss. When you turn the pyramid upside down the roles are reversed. The people become responsible and the job of management is to be responsive to them (Blanchard in Hesselbein *et al.*, 1996).

Co-leadership is not a fuzzy-minded buzzword... rather it is a tough minded strategy that will unleash the hidden talent in any enterprise. Above all co-leadership is inclusive, not exclusive... co-leadership should permeate every organization at every level... in this new organizational galaxy, power doesn’t reside in a single person or corner office. Rather power and responsibility are dispersed, giving the organization a whole constellation of costars (Heenan and Bennis, 1999, p. 5).

A common theme in all these quotations is the belief that leaders ought to contribute to the autonomy of the followers. A Kantian leader does not look for those who will simply follow orders to achieve a purpose laid down by the leader. Rather, the Kantian leader seeks to increase the autonomy and responsibility of followers so that they in turn become leaders in their own right.

Notes

- 1 I leave open the question as to whether the adoption of enlightened management practices both out of duty and because such

practices increase profits would be genuine moral actions for Kant.

- 2 The scholar who has contributed the most to our understanding of leadership is Jay Conger. See *The Charismatic Leader: Beyond the Myth of Exceptional Leadership* (1989), Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.

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