

MIT SLOAN SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT  
Course 15.997  
Fall 2005  
A NEW FORMAT FOR LEADERS  
6 Sessions beginning September 7, 2005  
Tuesday, Thursday – 8:30 to 10 am, E51-376

Ricardo Semler  
[rsemler@mit.edu](mailto:rsemler@mit.edu)

### OVERVIEW:

The leadership that we know is a miscreant hand-me-down result of ancestral war-making. Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, looked for signs that indicated that survival, as in securing food, was the origin of tribal hierarchies, but found that the pyramidal versions that we know derive only from humankind's (specially mankind's) predilection for dominance as "a continuation of policy by other means" as von Clausewitz mildly put it.

How much of leadership is a birthright and how much comes from practice? Can unnatural leaders become great ones? Were Churchill and Hitler, Alexander and Kublai Khan equally good leaders? Does it take an Iacocca to patriotically turn around and then deliver Chrysler to foreigners? Is Jack Welch an icon of good leadership or an act that, to follow, will require a turnaround of a giant company?

This seminar will focus on the new forms of leadership that tired forms of warfare have brought to their Walhalla. No longer is it possible to deal with the speed of change with anachronistic hierarchical models. But, equally, no organization has yet mastered the form that the future will require.

Learning from the past, in a time in which organizations are under great pressure, promises to reinforce patterns that are, at best, harbingers of doubtful results.

We need new models that are instinctive, innovative formats that can bend and bow to the wind, in contrast to the male imagery of stout oaks. The days of mighty generals with armies of millions is past. A terrorist with a vial in a pocket, riding the New York or Tokyo subway, can bring an army to its knees. The same is true for a kid with a smart idea in her parent's garage – entire fiefdoms of software fear this possibility. As a matter of fact, feudalistic enterprises such as Microsoft have found that what three kids in a garage can dream up cannot be emulated by dozens of thousands of engineers in 20 years of work – in their same company, alas.

The leadership that is in demand to make the most of the hotbed of extant talent seems to fly in the face of accumulated wisdom about what the "masses" of employees are believed to require. We hear stories of the need for "strong" leadership, about how lonely it is at the top, and how "good help is so hard to find".

The clichés of leadership are no longer warranted.

In this seminar we will do some soul-searching around these issues, together. The format will be somewhat loose, which will generate some discomfort. Good. The reading will sound a bit out of tune – it is. The bad news is that there are no simple answers and that you cannot be only right or wrong – you can easily be both. The good news is that there is a chance that the thought processes that you go through in this course might leave some indelible strains in your intuition about leadership, and may still serve you well in the distant future.

Brilliant minds that are razor-sharp quick studies are sometimes the worst raw material for leadership. Let us add to this broth the process that Prof. Mintzberg attaches

to MBA's: self-selected intelligentsia that is good at passing exams intended for the elite. How does this make for good leadership without invoking the elitist rationale that intelligence and inner drive qualify the top percentile of society to show the way to the remainder?

We see, almost daily, in the world of organizations, the over-achievers who have left heart, gut and equilibrium so far behind that they become isolated in a world of leaders that borders on clinical insanity. If we take the time to visit a faraway temple, we see smooth waving of hands as a leadership parameter that entices thousands of monks. If we observe orchestra conductors, we see the dictators of the Toscanini and von Karajan ilk, as well as the suave wavers of Tibetan gestures, with similar group results. We can all imagine Norman Schwarzkopf running GE, and Jack Welch as Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Are there techniques that serve as panacea for leadership woes? We will peruse these scenarios together, looking for the architecture of tomorrow's organizations, the leadership modes that could arise from the sea change in monumentality as solution.

There are, indeed, newer, softer, more balanced ways of running organizations. The side effects include the gratification of sharing weight, and of better sleep for the leader. This seminar, therefore, will not betray its essence by making you lose sleep in favor of reams of required reading. It will, instead, look to instill thoughtful contemplation of the alternatives that the new organizational panorama has brought to the fore.

### SUMMARY OF GOALS:

- § To provide an innovative framework for leadership in the future, based on negotiation and balance of power
- § To entice students to consider alternatives to classic methods of leadership
- § To collectively develop variations that may be useful to others

### **Assumptions**

- § That the extant leadership paradigm is anachronistic
- § That the military legacy in leadership leads to the past
- § That future leaders need to learn to nurture organizations that think for themselves
- § That a mission with a zealot at its fore is a dangerous and unsustainable format

### **Propositions**

- § A leadership concept that focuses on processes and architecture
- § Leaders that accept omission as a valid form of reaction
- § Organizations that are designed to find their own answers and direction
- § Hierarchies that are unable to act systemically
- § Employee and stakeholder power-sharing mechanisms instead of control as a management tool

## FORMAT:

Roughly half of the time will be spent collectively examining the assumptions and possibilities of new forms of leadership. This will enable you to test your weltanschauung on this topic. Air time and demeanour will be of little consequence.

Another third or so will be made up of leadership exercises, cunningly crafted to make you fall for all the tricks in the book (part and parcel of which is letting you know that there is manipulation afoot, thereby making it difficult to differentiate substance from trickery – all part of the Machiavellian idea).

A last third (yes, the course adds up to two thirds plus one half of a normal course) is dedicated to the thoughtfulness that the theme requires, and to designing responses that you can choose to call take-home-value (I, personally, can not find any at my house, however much I search).

## STRUCTURE:

- § Six sessions of 90 minutes each
- § Reading list front-loaded
- § One (first session) of exposition and academic framework
- § Two sessions of interactive debate in reference to the reading materials, plus a visitor
- § One Session on comparative leadership: the Military as Mould
- § Two sessions of simulated leadership situational analyses/exercises

## PREPARATION:

Simple forms of preparation call for reading the material, attempting to answer pre-set questions, and showing up on time.

None of the above meets my standards of preparation. If you don't read anything, don't try to answer the non-existent pre-set questions and always show up late (and compensate by leaving early), chances are you will still be bitten by the mosquito of thoughtfulness – the essence of this seminar.

Although there is some reading that I strongly suggest (called Required), no harm will come to those who wake up late, and arrive with socks of different colors with wet hair. After all, the drive and self-discipline that world dominance will require of you cannot be instilled in a military manner, without the sad side effects of outwardly imposed structure.

Rather, I hope to make this interesting enough to coax you into the most difficult form of preparation: the thoughtfulness that antecedes an opportunity. If you prepare by thinking of Mao Tse Tung versus Ross Perot in the shower, muse on your empathy with the night watchman versus jealousy of mega bonuses as you return in the wee hours from one too many beers, you will have prepared spectacularly.

This, even in jest, will dawn on you as you go through the weeks in which covering the material is not akin to letting wisdom seep in through the pores.

## REQUIRED READING

The wish to share with you the reading which lights a bulb in my head, titillates my palate and produces an odd tear is no guarantee that you will feel the same way about it.

That is what this Required Reading is about: my suggestion of texts that will start a process in your hearts or minds. Read them if you will, if you find the time, if you trust my instincts from afar. I would, if I were you - they were painstakingly chosen and are as short as I would dare cut them down to. Read them as early into the term as possible. However, don't let this be a burden, but a moment of rare insight.

The course pack is composed of excerpts of:

Baron-Cohen, Simon: "The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain";

Braudel, Fernand: "A History of Civilizations";

Buzzell, Gale: "The PIMS Strategy";

Galbraith, John Kenneth: "Economics in Perspective";

Jung, Carl: "The Development of Personality";

Kafka, Franz: "Before the Law" and "An Imperial Message";

Keegan, John: "A History of Warfare";

Lévi-Strauss, Claude: "Tristes Tropiques";

Márquez, Gabriel Garcia: "Big Mama's Funeral";

Mintzberg, Henry: "Mintzberg on Management";

Ohmae, Kenichi: "The Mind of the Strategist";

Polo, Marco: "The Travels";

Roy, Arundhati: "The Algebra of Infinite Justice"

Russell, Bertrand: "A History of Western Philosophy";

### GRADING:

This seminar is on a Pass/Fail basis, and you will have to muster some considerable effort to fail.

I ask of you a paper by Class 5, which will give me a chance to understand how open your pores became. As you can by now anticipate, the length and format is entirely up to you. Anything from a phrase to a Tolstoyan novel are welcome, I will read and comment on all with loving care. I am also open to your creative vibes, accepting poems, videos and symphonies in the stead of a paper.

This will also avoid air-time evaluations, give the meek an early opportunity before they inherit the earth, and create a one-on-one debriefing opportunity.

The one unbending military requirement is that you put your name on whatever you give me.

## CLASS SEQUENCE:

### CLASS 1

- § History of alternate leadership models
- § Wrap-up of reading materials
  - § Academic framework
  - § Praxis
- § Major assumptions
- § Main propositions for the course
- § First reactions and exchange

### CLASS 2

#### Three 30-minute themes

- § Class divided in Believers, Skeptic- Spectators and Naysayers, as per initial reaction to propositions
- § Theme 1: Is a Mission Better Than None?
- § Theme 2: Are Followers But Sheep?
- § Theme 3: Does a Strong Leader Have to Be Strong?

### CLASS 3

- § Continuation of Three 30-minute debates:
- § Theme 4: Does Democracy Not Jibe With Business?
- § Theme 5: Can Leaders Live With Constant Dissent and Lack of Imposed Authority?
- § Theme 6: Does Self-Direction Lead to Abuse and Lack of Discipline?

### CLASS 4

- § Debate on The Led
- § Two 30-Minute Debates
- § Theme 7: How Will New Leaders Pick the Led?
- § Theme 8: Designing a New Recruitment and Selection Roster

### § CLASS 5

- § Simulated Leadership Situations
- § Identical Situation With Differing Leadership Formats
- § 60-minute workshop in 3 groups (third of class) + 30-minute analysis:
  - § Group I: defined and strong leader

- § Group II: emerging leader
- § Group III: collective direction

#### CLASS 6 – FINAL SESSION

- § Simulated Leadership Crisis Situation
- § A 45-minute workshop in the foundations of sustainable leadership, followed by Lessons Learned)
- § Four groups simulate a business crisis
- § Groups I and II: Leader with Classic Power
- § Group III and IV: Collective Direction

#### WRAP UP TARGETS:

- § Learning by emulation
- § Empathy by simulation
- § Reflection based on lived experience
- § Collective thought instead of top-down conclusions
- § Comprehension of leadership as a learned experience