Unlikely Leaders

Unlikely Leaders Discussion

Key:

I: = Interviewer
RB: = Richard Blundel
SM: = Sarah McKean
NL: = Nicholas Logie

I: When you think of a leader, who springs to mind? Maybe Barack Obama or Winston Churchill? But leadership can take many different forms and come from unlikely people. In a world where traditional leaders continue to let us down, perhaps unlikely leaders will be our salvation. In this Open University Podcast which accompanies an additional slideshow series, we'll be exploring the meaning of leadership while challenging some common assumptions surrounding the concept. Joining me are Richard Blundel, Senior Lecturer in Enterprise Development in the OU Department for Public Leadership and Social Enterprise.

RB: There are these opportunities that create new organisations. We desperately need some solutions to some of the very pressing problems we're facing these days.

I: Sarah McKean, Senior Lecturer in Health and Wellbeing in the Open University Department of Health and Social Care.

SM: You know, the traditional kind of leaders that we see around us, they're letting us down.

I: And Nicholas Logie, PhD Graduate from the Open University Music Department.

NL: There are other occasions when you need a transformational leader who takes you to places that you didn't really ever know existed.

I: Leadership – anyone hazard a definition? Sarah?

SM: I think defining leadership is very difficult. There's often an assumption it has to hinge on an individual and there's that kind of emphasis on one person being a leader. But actually, I think leadership is much more about the position that that person's in – not in terms of occupying a position of authority but how they relate to the people around them, what their cause is, what their vision is. What it is that they're fighting for or what it is that they're trying to lead. So, often it's about the followership as much as it is about the leadership; if you haven't got people who are interested in following you then what are you going to lead?

I: Richard.

RB: I think it is important probably at the outset to distinguish the individual leader and leadership. People exercise leadership but leadership is more than just a particular individual.

I: Nicholas?

NL: Well, it's a difficult one for me because the area I've been dealing with is primarily conductors and leadership, and I think you could take a Martian into a concert hall and ask them who's doing the leading and they would point to the conductor. So it's a very, very obvious focus, a very obvious position of leadership, and it's equally clear exactly who the followers are. But of course, it's the manner in which the conductor deals with the orchestra, the context, how he or she adjusts for the particular cultural context.

I: Richard, what about trends in academic literature as far as leadership is concerned?

RB: Well there's quite a long history now, you know, a century or so of literature on leadership. I guess you can broadly see a shift from a focus on the individual level, research on individual personality traits and characteristics, towards increasing recognition of the wider context. So in the middle of the 20th century there was this move towards contingency theories of leadership, saying that the leadership that was required in a particular situation would differ depending on the nature of that situation.

And then we've moved on to some other ideas, putting it very broadly, including this distinction between transactional and transformational leadership. And some people talk about charismatic leadership as well at some mid-point in there. And these ideas about followership as well, which again is to do with the context in which the leadership is exercised and getting away from just the individual.

SM: Another interesting area in that kind of trend in the literature as well is the idea of situational leadership, so looking at how leadership changes depending on the situation that the leader is in, the people that they're working with and what those people need. So again,

it's that kind of sensitivity to followership and the context. And I think that's… one of the strongest trends in the literature really is that growing awareness of the need to understand leadership in context.

I: And what about the importance of leadership in a wide range of different contexts? You've talked about music, Nicholas, and Richard has been thinking about the business and social entrepreneurship, I suppose – schools, hospitals, social activism. All sorts of areas that leadership is extremely important in?

SM: I think across all of those areas, one of the most important things is integrity. For somebody to be a leader we need to believe in them; we need to believe that they have a kind of ethical and moral code that they're working to that's worthy of following. And they need to be able to communicate that in a way that convinces us that they're being genuine. And I think quite a lot of our, you know, the traditional kind of leaders that we see around us, they're letting us down [Laughter] in that sense, and we don't see that kind of integrity and that kind of ethical basis for their leadership.

But I think increasingly there is a whole range of different sorts of leaders that are coming forward where we do see much more of that, and I think that's exciting change.

NL: And I think an interesting point that Sarah's making, I think there are many people who want to be leaders and possibly are able to be good leaders, but there are also many people who don't think of themselves as leaders. With the right kind of environment and the right encouragement they could actually make extremely good leaders.

I: Richard.

RB: I come from a business school background and organisation and research type of background, so I'm kind of programmed to think of leaders in an organisational setting. But I think what we've seen in the series is that there are other spheres in which you can be a leader, so there are… this opens up, if you like, the discussion about leadership. So there are these kind of intellectual and cultural or social leaders. So I think there's quite an interesting issue about how important the organisation is and, for some of the leaders, I think there's nothing in the way of a formal organisation behind them, perhaps. In others there's perhaps a bit more.

I: If you're a good leader in one area does that necessarily mean that you'd be a good leader in another?

SM: No, I think people lead in different ways and different contexts. There was a wonderful example in the news: there was a bus driver in Buffalo, he was driving his usual route and his eye was caught by a young woman stood on a bridge and it looked like she was about to jump. And he stopped his bus, and it's beautiful because the security camera on the bus caught what he did. He stopped the bus, he opened the door and he called out to her and said, "Are you okay? Can I help you?" No response. He said that she was looking distraught, detached. He stopped his bus, he got off, he went over and he took her arm and said, "Can I help you back over the barrier?" And then he sat down with her and held her hand still.

And just in my mind, it was an example of fantastic leadership, you know, he saw a moment where something needed doing. Now, I'm sure hundreds of people drove past that day and completely ignored that young woman stood on the bridge. I kind of think if our politicians had been driving past, would they have thought they were too important, because they've got their positional authority, to actually stop and help somebody in that situation? And I'm sure when he took on his job as a bus driver he didn't expect that he would have to demonstrate that kind of leadership.

I: But for some people the organisation behind them wouldn't accept that kind of action being taken. And that partly must make an awful lot of people stop and think, "I can't do that, I can't step forward at this particular point in time."

SM: Yes, I think so. And I think that's one of the things, one of the problems where leadership comes up against organisational culture sometimes. And there is a culture within organisations that stops people from speaking up, from taking that kind of ethical stance, and it backfires on them. But you know, things are changing, I think – slowly.

NL: And this is particularly so in orchestras where the tradition of the conductor taking the whole rehearsal and basically, traditionally, orchestras not saying anything, not adding anything verbally at least in the way of suggestions, but just simply getting on with their job and doing what they're told. I mean, very, very outdated. And again, there are small changes, orchestras where the orchestras' members are much more proactive and involved.

And of course, the end result, when musicians are really being musicians and really doing their stuff, is amazing. And conductors need to harness that as leaders.

I: What is an unlikely leader, and are we moving away from the more traditional types of leadership? Richard.

RB: When we use this term 'traditional' I suppose what we're saying is, probably from a western perspective, that we're thinking of the traditional leader based on our whole history

and culture and the way leadership's been represented in the west. And one of those features should be the 'top-down' nature of leadership. So we're used to a fairly hierarchical structure of organisations and models, like the military, for example, and so we would think of the Generals being in charge and the troops just following orders. You kind of resort to clichéd examples but, you know, the kind of colonial example that we talk about where the explorer to some remote region reaches a tribe that they've never met before and says, "Take me to your leader." So there's the assumption there is an individual who is in charge of everything and also, by speaking to that person, you will actually be able to make a difference or to interact effectively.

SM: I think that traditional kind of model of leadership as well tends to write out a lot of leadership from history – women in particular, black minority ethnic leaders. You know, you think from health and social care, my background, there's a lot of talk about someone like Florence Nightingale – but what about Mary Seacole [Laughter], why don't we hear as much about her? The assumption that the leader is someone who is born, somebody who has these natural abilities and this kind of all-powerful charisma, and that he's usually a white man in a suit, does stop us I think from looking for other unlikely leaders and for leadership in other places.

I: Nicholas.

NL: Of course the gender issue is massive in the orchestral world in conductors. Marin Alsop is phenomenal in the way she bats off the inevitable question, "What is it like to be a woman conductor?" and she says, "I don't know what it's like to be a man conductor." [Laughter]. And the fact that in the world of music which, after all, does have equality, that there are still so few women conductors. And it isn't just the orchestral musicians – it's the management, it's the audiences, they want to see white males I'm afraid.

I: That brings us onto something, Sarah, that you mentioned before, it's about the followership as well as the leadership. So in a way, if we're following the white traditional male conductors as opposed to wanting to see more women in that role then we just perpetrate the myth of that kind of leadership.

SM: It's a difficult one. It's one of those kind of social changes, I think, that we're seeing move slowly in the right direction where women are becoming more acceptable in positions of authority and positions of leadership. And of course, being in a position of authority doesn't necessarily mean that you're a leader or can lead. But I think for women in particular both of those are important.

But it is about followership as well, and it's about, you know, within organisations there's been research done that shows that when men act in a caring way as a leader, they show an empathy with staff and an understanding and are supportive, then they're seen as going the extra mile as leaders. Whereas women who behave like that in a position of leadership, it's just kind of, 'Well that's what women do.' And these are all to do with social expectations, which is much wider than what any individual can do in a particular position of leadership.

RB: I think another thing about this traditional view is also that this, as I say, I can't really over-emphasise the emphasis on the individual. And the trouble with that is that when things go wrong, again all the pressures are on that individual. And whilst not excusing in any way the many very colourful examples we've had of individuals failing very badly, either behaving unethically or worse…

I: Would you like to throw in a few examples there? [Laughter].

RB: I think everyone listening could draw some examples from politics, both in the UK and other countries. If you focus on that individual you do miss more systemic issues. So that has been raised in the sense of the financial crisis, people do refer to systemic failures and so on. But I think there is still the tendency to flick back to the individuals and not really to unpack what the history and the structures that were inside those organisations, that are making it really impossible for a leader to make a change.

In social science we talk about structure and agency, and I think leadership is right in the heart of that. Because on the one hand there are all these structures that maybe constrain you but also enable you to be a leader if you can manipulate them in the right way, but there are these constraints on agency. But on the other hand, what we see as successful leadership is where this agency is exercised and you actually see some change.

SM: I think, I mean, I'll expand a bit on that. I think you're absolutely right, we can't just look at the individual and say, "It's you that's letting us down." But a leader does need to have personal awareness of their role. For example, they might say, "Oh well, it was the previous leaders, they let us down, and I'm making the best of a bad job," kind of thing.

I: When have we heard that before?

SM: Yeah. [Laughter]. But also there's the contextual awareness; they've got to be aware and we've got to be aware when we're judging them of the context that they're working in. And a good leader is aware of that and can work with that. And then also, they've got to be

aware of what their goals are as well and be true to them. And I think that's where the integrity and the ethical values come in as well.

Which kind of leads me on to the fourth thing that I think leaders need to be aware of, and that's the teams that they're working with. The team awareness, the other people, and how they can bring them on board around the vision.

I: This is the Open University Podcast and we're looking at unlikely leaders that our three academics, each nominated for an accompanying slideshow series. Richard nominated Marian Beebe, a social entrepreneur. Sarah has nominated Russell Brand, the comedian. And Nicholas nominated Sir Simon Rattle, the conductor. So Richard, tell us about your unlikely leader.

RB: Well my unlikely leader is a woman called Maryam Bibi. She founded, or co-founded, an organisation called 'Khwendo Kor', which is a Pashto term from the north-west region of Pakistan, and it works with women and children in particular in those traditional communities. And it does a number of things, including education projects and health projects around women's welfare.

But in terms of her actual leadership, the way she exercises leadership, which as I say I think feeds into, kind of broadening our understanding of what it might be to be entrepreneurial, is that she has created a new organisation from scratch in incredibly difficult circumstances. And this isn't like Dragons' Den where it's set up in a slightly pantomime way with threatening music and so on. In the sense of the threats that her organisation face, I mean, they are literal threats of violence, and the schools that they built have been bombed and people have had personal threats against them.

It is entrepreneurship but not in the form that you might think of it if you looked at a lot of the popular representations.

I: And Nicholas, having listened to all of that, and you nominated Simon Rattle.

NL: My reason for choosing Rattle, I mean, first of all we have to realise that in a business which is about making sound the conductor is quite unique in that they don't make any sound at all. So all their leadership really has to work through other people. And my reason for picking Rattle is that he's like a sponge; he just accepts everything that comes towards him and learns and learns, and is still learning. And he's unique, as far as I know, in that he's had a mentor since he was 18 years old, the same man, John Carewe, himself a conductor, who has been there for Simon, to talk with him, to listen in to his rehearsals and give advice.

The other aspect I pick at is his ability to adjust, to adapt to cultural context. So he's used to conducting the great orchestras around the world. But the orchestras in the Anglo-Saxon world are very different to where he is now, Central Europe and Berlin.

I: Which brings in another aspect – the cultural differences that a leader may come across and again, presumably, somebody who's a good leader in one cultural context isn't necessarily going to make a multi-cultural leader.

NL: Well this, of course, is interesting with conductors because they do travel all around the world. And of course, those of us who sit in the orchestra we see different conductors come to us and we want to sap their individuality. We want to have individuals, we want to have different personalities. But of course, the conductors themselves travel around the world and see all these different cultures and they're doomed if they say, "Well, the last orchestra I conducted was able to do this, why can't you do it?" They have to really, really feed into the individual personalities of each orchestra, and every orchestra does have its own personality.

So flexibility, adaptability, very quick thinking, is all part of the game.

I: Of leadership?

NL: Yes.

I: Sarah, your choice of an unlikely leader I think was the one that left me most – flummoxed? [Laughter]. Might be the word that I would use, I'm not sure whether Richard and Nicholas will agree with me. Does Russell Brand have all of those credentials that Nicholas has just listed there?

SM: Yes, well I think he does, actually. The thing that attracted me to Russell Brand as an unlikely leader originally was through my research on alternative spiritualities. He is a very spiritual person. He talks a lot about what that brings to him in terms of his recognition or kind of connection. So he's very open about a lot of things which people wouldn't usually talk about in western culture. So…

I: But is it not about followership then? Because people, they find him very open, they find him very honest, and so they're following him in that way rather than looking at him to be a leader. They're simply finding somebody they like in their openness and honesty to follow.

SM: Yeah. I think the thing about Russell Brand is, he's a little bit like Marmite – you either love him or hate him. And the people who love him will, yes, follow him and say, "Yeah, isn't he talking wonderful sense all the time?" People who hate him think, "Oh well, I'm not

listening to him, he's a moron and he's just, you know, why should we listen to an Essex wide-boy?" kind of thing.

But actually, I've noticed that a lot of people when they do listen to what he's saying think, "You know what, he's speaking a lot of sense." And he did the very interesting interview with Jeremy Paxman, and Paxman said to him, "Who's given you the right, what gives you the right to tell us anything, to talk about politics or anything like that?" And he said, "Well, you know what, nothing gives me the right, I've taken the right," because, he said, he is thoroughly disenchanted with politics, with our leaders.

And the interesting thing that he was saying, he's not saying that he's got the solutions, in particular he wasn't going to sit in his hotel room with Jeremy Paxman and write the new agenda. But what he was saying was that enough is enough, and he's got a passion, he's got a voice and people can hear him.

I: Do unlikely leaders then grow out of disenchantment with traditional leaders?

SM: I think they can do, and I think the idea of Russell Brand being an unlikely leader growing out of that kind of sense of disenchantment is what I like. Whether or not he'll, you know, he may just think that that's ridiculous, "I'm not a leader, I don't want to be." Russell, if you're listening just let me know because [Laughter] he could be a great leader.

I: Nicholas.

NL: My choice for an unlikely leader seems a bit ironic really, because Simon Rattle is a very, very likely leader. But what I wanted to emphasise, in fact, was the fact that many of these conductors, and I think Rattle is probably amongst them, don't think of themselves as leaders. In fact, they really almost want to negate the fact of their leadership and talk much more about leading through the music, of being a conduit for the music. And maybe this is a concept that can be extrapolated into other areas too. What you were saying about integrity, the mission, that must become the most important thing and the leader, as it were, becomes a vehicle for that mission or for that goal.

SM: Yeah, absolutely, I think that makes sense. And increasingly, in leadership and management literature and research, there's been this idea that leadership is much more about a process rather than the idea of an individual. And that it's about, you know, what is enacted around that process. Then they actually have to look at themselves a bit more critically and acknowledge their weaknesses, and acknowledge that no, they don't have all the answers.

I: Nicholas.

NL: This has led me to believe that leaders really need to have a pair of outside eyes and ears to reflect back at them; to help them to understand what they're doing, but in a very sympathetic way and with real empathy and so on. I don't know how that works in your fields, but…

RB: In my area I think the unlikely nature of it was that I was looking for an entrepreneurial leader, as entrepreneurship's my background. The leader I chose I think illustrates that entrepreneurship is a broader topic; it kind of runs in parallel to leadership. If you look at the literatures of entrepreneurship and leadership they've followed a very similar history. But there's a lot of activity around social entrepreneurs and, you know, what are these people? Haven't these already existed for centuries and now being labelled with this sort of entrepreneur title?

So I wanted to do a bit of extra deconstructing, if you like, of entrepreneurial leadership as well as leadership. There are, as Sarah said, there's common ground in terms of the spirituality and I wouldn't dream of speaking for Maryam but you understand that she comes from a deeply religious area. But I think there's other aspects of Russell's personality and the way that he relates to context that has some echoes in Maryam's experience.

I: So in a way we're looking at a new style of leadership, are we?

SM: A style of leadership that isn't afraid to go against the grain. I think all of these, I mean, your example, you're saying he doesn't always listen to his mentor, your example where she's doing something very, very unlikely for a woman in her position. And Russell Brand, as I say, he stands up in these glitzy kind of celebrity situations and makes a mockery of them, actually, in a very clever way, and exposes us to the kind of lies that western society are built upon. And I think that kind of unlikely leadership, it challenges society and it can make a real difference.

RB: Yeah, I think my one caveat would be that there's leadership in the world of ideas, which I guess we're talking with Russell Brand that it's at the level of ideas. And that can be incredibly powerful. But then probably most of our other… Nicola Adams, I guess, is also, her kind of leadership, the boxer, is in the world of ideas changing people's perceptions of women in that sport. When you attach that kind of leadership to an organisation then, as well as the transforming effect on people's thinking, you maybe have transforming effects on the ground. Because the organisation itself might effect change.

Sarah was saying that he hasn't got the solutions himself so it's only a starting point, whereas once you've got an organisation you actually get a kind of end point, if you like, that something actually starts to happen.

SM: What it can do though is to instil a passion in people, and I think that is an important part of leadership and an important part of change, and leadership is all about change as well.

NL: No, I mean, I think what Richard was saying makes absolute sense. And at one level, a high level of expertise has to come in, somebody really understands their craft. We see this with conductors, the traditional transactional and transformational leader. I mean, there are situations where you just need a transactional leader – somebody who can do their job, who can really get the results quickly and efficiently and effectively. And there are other occasions when you need a transformational leader who takes you to places that you didn't really ever know existed.

RB: Yeah, I think the kind of exciting thing is that though again, from a kind of entrepreneurial perspective, is that there are these opportunities that create new organisations and we desperately need some solutions to some of the very pressing problems we're facing these days. Perhaps it's naïve on my part, but the thought that there must be people out there who have what it takes maybe to pick up on ideas. So they may be motivated by Russell Brand's outrage at their current situation, you know, there's something we can do, there's some constructive way that we can organise resources the way entrepreneurs do, pull resources together, gain legitimacy for some kind of new way of organising that will help to deliver the solution.

SM: The global network now that we have of knowledge and awareness, I think that can be very powerful for giving people the strength to think, "Yes, well I'll build on their ideas and I'll do something, I'll make a difference." And also this idea that you have to be self-aware, not just in terms of your relationships with other people as a leader and how you influence the situation you're working in, but also in terms of your influence on your own individual kind of integrity and authenticity.

And that's where the spiritual side comes in. We're not talking necessarily about spiritual in a kind of religious or other worldly sense, it's just a recognition that actually we're all human, even these people who are in positions of authority and leadership.

RB: Although in some contexts that's very difficult then. I mean, in our 24-hour news culture it can be very difficult for these high-profile leaders to admit these kind of weaknesses. Because it may be in terms of a commercial company, it may be a sensitive issue with the

share price. There have certainly been cases with people having mental health difficulties and actually translating into undermining confidence in the company.

SM: There was one of the things that attracted me to Russell Brand as an unlikely leader as well, when he stood up in the Home Affairs Select Committee on drug rehabilitation and treatment of drug offenders. And you know, he had some genuine kind of authority to be speaking about these issues because he is an ex-drug user. He's been there and done it, kind of thing, and so he has an understanding from the inside, and he acknowledges that. The people that he was talking to, most of them had no understanding because they had no inside experience. Of the few that would have had inside experience, they wouldn't have admitted to that because they were in positions of authority. Whereas he actually does admit to it and he says, "Yes, I've done bad things and this is what I've learnt from it and this is why it makes me a more authentic person," in terms of what he then says.

I: What do recent global trends, you know, financial insecurity, increased privatisation and internationalisation, what does all of that mean for leadership? Richard.

RB: I mean, it's something of a cliché, really, that we live in this increasingly globalised world and, obviously, that varies depending on which part of the world you are and what sector you're operating in. For a lot of people working in a cross-cultural setting is the norm. So it's another of those skills we talked about earlier on that you're going to have to acquire this kind of cross-cultural awareness. And it's the sort of thing that is certainly in business schools, in courses on organisation there would be training to be had, education to be available in that kind of area.

Certainly, any leader of a large multi-national corporation has to deal with this kind of issue, or various levels within those kind of organisations. Nicholas gave some very good examples of orchestras. I'm sure there's some translation could be done between the international orchestra and the multi-national company.

I: Nicholas.

NL: Interestingly, and you've just made me think about this, obviously musicians are now travelling all over the world, and there's a massive influx into Western Europe and North America of Asian musicians, absolutely fantastic musicians. But funnily enough, as followers, they are more traditional than their western counterparts in that they do sit there silently and they do extremely well. Whereas those of us brought up in a western culture tend to be slightly more combative and have our own opinions about how things should go.

SM: Another influence of the kind of recent changes, the way organisations are changing, is I think there's greater expectations placed on individual responsibility at all levels. Certainly within health and social care practice where I do some of my research, there's an increasing emphasis on distributed leadership and leadership at all levels. So expecting everybody to act as a leader, if you like, which is a huge ask [Laughter] to expect everyone to be able to do that.

I: It's a huge ask, but am I right in thinking that the NHS is trying very hard to make leadership training available for something like 25,000 employees?

SM: It is, yes. And it'll be interesting to see what the effects of that are, what leadership training they use. Because I think there's the danger of putting too much strain on already over-strained staff who are just trying to get on with their job, and who actually, realistically, in their day-to-day role, aren't going to need a lot of the kind of stuff that's probably going to be in that training. So I think it has to be very carefully tailored, and to make it empowering rather than disempowering. Because to expect everybody to take on a position of leadership is just unrealistic, and it could cause more harm than good.

I: And I suppose the same goes for any organisation trying to put leadership practices into place, not just the NHS. So how important is leadership in OU coursework, for instance, for students to understand leadership?

RB: Well I mean, leadership's certainly a part of the courses that we run in the business school. If we take our MBA, for example, that course is very much experience-based. So what we try to do is to link back to the students' own direct experience, which is normally work experience, and also to share the different experiences of different students. So in an area like entrepreneurial leadership this would apply to other aspects of leadership as well. But if I just spoke for that, our elective on entrepreneurship, we use that kind of experience-based approach to broaden the discussion of what leadership might be in an entrepreneurial setting. That's quite healthy, I think, because it avoids the situation where you do get the sense that there's one, this one traditional way of being a leader. And instead of that you see that there is this range of ways that it's done.

SM: In the Faculty of Health and Social Care, one of the things that we've noticed is a greater demand from employers and students for a better understanding of leadership. And one of the new modules that we've just written was based on this kind of change in demand really, that we used to run a course on managing care and it's now leadership and management in health and social care. And that's reflected in the kind of partnership working across health and social care practice now, and also this idea that people need to be aware of

the difference between leadership and management. And that leadership is something that people can learn the skills and the abilities and the self-awareness to put into practice.

I: So, as a final word then, the leader is not necessarily just born. We can create leaders given the right context, the right process, the right people and the right organisational development.

SM: Absolutely.

I: I'm going to exercise my leadership skills now and bring this discussion to an end, and say thank you very much Richard, Sarah and Nicholas. Thank you for joining us.