

Leading beautifully: How mastery, congruence and purpose create the ascetic of embodied leadership practice

Donna Ladkin, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 2008, 19, 31-41.

Key concept

- ‘Leadership’ as the process of influence is not just about what a leader does, but also about the way that that leader does it. Effective leadership has the same kind of psychological/aesthetic effect as does the seemingly effortless performance of a great musician or other artist.

Main points

- Leadership, as the process of influencing others, is often said to be as much ‘art’ as ‘science’. However, the literature provides little guidance on just what is meant by the ‘art’ associated with leadership. This paper notes that other researchers (e.g., Keith Grint, in his *The Arts of Leadership*, 2000) highlight four particular art-forms that leadership emulates: the philosophical arts, the fine arts, the martial arts, and the performing arts.
- The paper focuses on the last of these, i.e., the performing arts. It argues that actions are ‘artistic’ or ‘beautiful’ when they embody three particular aspects of behaviour: mastery, congruence and purpose.
- **Mastery.** To be masterful requires attention to the here-and-now possibilities inherent within any given moment. This means that the leader must not only be expert in the relevant activity but so expert that they can take advantage of moment-by-moment occurrences to reinforce their influence.
- **Coherence.** To be coherent involves expressing the self through forms which are congruent with the overall message and purpose, i.e., not just what one says but also the way one says it. This requires a communication style that reinforces the leader’s influence through the seemingly-invisible clues embodied in the leader’s stance, facial expressions, bodily tension, tone of voice, etc. All this helps followers to draw conclusions about the leader’s motives, hidden agendas, and ‘true’ purposes, and whether a leader’s performance will be ‘read’ as authentic.
- In terms of coherence, the paper draws attention to the importance of ‘micro-affirmations’. These are the discrete behaviours that offer encouragement and bring out the best in people. They often involve gestures as small as holding another’s glance, nodding when they are speaking, or literally patting them on the back. Importantly, however, such actions cannot be readily faked: and they must be authentic in order to reinforce -- i.e., be coherent with -- the leader’s purpose and effect.
- **Purpose.** ‘Beauty’ is synonymous with ‘balance’: when there is congruence between an act’s purpose and how that purpose is embodied. The most effective leadership involves the leader acting in a way that fits his/her purpose. For example, if the purpose is to solve an immediate problem, the leader must act with a sense of confidence and urgency; but if the purpose is to solve a longer-term problem, the leader must act in a way that engages others in the process of finding innovative approaches and solutions.
- The paper makes the important point that charisma often involves followers subjecting themselves to the will of the leader. The paper argues that such subjection does not comply with the true spirit of authentic leadership. ‘Beautiful’ charismatic leadership in this context builds or affirms the various self-identities of the followers.
- **Managerial implications:**
 - Reinforces and gives substance to the notion that leadership is ‘an art’.
 - In this respect, shows that leaders should be as concerned with the way that they project themselves as with what they are trying to project. Thus, for example, it is not enough to have and communicate a sense of vision/purpose: to have the desired effect, it also needs to be communicated in a particular way.