Scholarly Review of Kellerman’s Bad Leadership

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Abstract

Barbara Kellerman discusses the concept of bad leadership and the seven types of bad leadership. Kellerman’s premise is that there is a dark side to leadership. The dynamics of this type of leadership must be studied and delved into to make progress in the area of leadership studies. Kellerman maintains that followers are an integral part in leadership, both good and bad leadership. Followers may be more responsible for bad leadership than the bad leader.
A Scholarly Book Review of Bad Leadership

Introduction

Leadership studies have been around for several decades now, with the study of human behavior, leadership styles and how to motivate and influence followers to achieve a desired result. The study of leadership has concentrated on good leaders and what good leaders do to achieve desired results. Barbara Kellerman takes the study of leadership further and addresses the concept of Bad Leadership. To understand what good leadership entails, we must also understand bad leadership.

Thesis

Kellerman discusses the dark side of leadership. Bad leadership would not happen if it were not for bad followers. Kellerman (2004) argues that there is something odd about the idea that leadership can be distinguished from coercion, and that leadership and power are unrelated. In everyday life, there are good leaders and good followers doing good things but also there are bad leaders and bad followers doing bad things (2004).

Kellerman (2004) maintains two arguments in her book, first that placing bad leadership along two different axis—ineffective and unethical—clarifies how the word bad is being used. Secondly, Kellerman (2004) claims that breaking the whole of bad leadership into seven types—inept, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil—has certain advantages which should not be minimized.

Kellerman further maintains that leaders should be looked at only in association with followers. According to Kellerman (2004), ‘leaders and followers share responsibility for leadership, bad as well as good’ (p. 226).
Main Points

In Kellerman’s book, Bad Leadership, she addresses the reasons for being bad, why leaders behave badly, why do we follow bad leaders and why do followers behave badly. Leaders behave badly for various reasons and behave badly in different ways (Kellerman, 2004). According to Kellerman (2004), sometimes the context fosters bad behavior, sometimes followers entice leaders to go astray, but the main reason leaders behave badly is because of who they are and what they want.

Leaders of various kinds abound and their followers usually follow even when their leaders are misguided or malevolent (Kellerman, 2004). Why would we follow leaders who behave badly? Kellerman believes it is important to answer this question in order to reduce the number of bad leaders. Kellerman argues that we follow bad leaders because of our individual needs and group needs. Leaders, even bad leaders, can satisfy our most basic needs; it is easy to assume that they know what they are doing; sometimes we follow bad leaders because of the need for certainty (2004).

According to Kellerman (2004), groups may go along with bad leaders because even bad leaders can provide important benefits, in particular maintain order, provide cohesion and identity, and do the collective work. It also seems that followers will follow even bad leaders because it is in their best interest just to go with the flow, not following could put things that are important to them at risk such as family, position, and even life (2004).

Kellerman addresses the importance of followers in Bad Leadership. Kellerman argues that followers who knowingly, deliberately commit themselves to bad leaders are in fact
themselves bad (2004). Self-interest drives followership, follower’s dedication to bad leaders is strongest when their leaders are very bad as opposed to those that are only somewhat bad (2004).

An important concept in Kellerman’s Bad Leadership is the role of the follower. Kellerman (2004) states ‘the lack of clarity about what exactly defines a good leader, and how to distinguish a good leader from a bad one, is mirrored in the follower’ (p. 30). Kellerman addresses two categories of bad leadership, ineffective and unethical. Ineffective leadership does not produce desired change possibly because of missing traits, weak skills, strategies badly conceived, or tactics badly employed (2004). Ineffective followers also lack these qualities and lack the skills necessary to be good followers so consequently, ineffective followers are bad followers.

Unethical leadership fails to distinguish between right and wrong (Kellerman, 2004). Followers are not exempt from accountability. Kellerman (2004) argues that ethical followers take the leader into account, exemplify private virtues such as courage and temperance, and engage the leader and other followers on behalf of the common good, unethical followers do not do any of these things.

To further understand bad leadership, Kellerman describes seven types of bad leadership. The types of bad leadership include incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular and evil. The incompetent leader lacks the will or skill or both to sustain effective action (Kellerman, 2004). For some leaders you wonder how did they ever get the position in the first place. Kellerman states that leaders can be incompetent for various reasons, including lack of experience, education, or expertise. Leaders can be incompetent in various ways from miscalculation to mismanagement, from silliness to stupidity, and from carelessness to
callousness (2004). Kellerman makes her argument that just as leaders can be incompetent, followers can be incompetent as well. Followers can be incompetent by ignoring or discounting warning signs and letting bad leadership linger (2004).

Kellerman’s example of Juan Antonio Samaranch, former president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), states her case that incompetence can lead to bad leadership. Samaranch became complacent and careless during his tenure at IOC president. Samaranch’s followers were just as responsible for his bad leadership because they were beholden to him and not the organization. Being left unchecked and unchallenged by his followers, he failed to establish an organization that provided necessary checks and balances that ultimately led to his demise at president of IOC.

Kellerman (2004) describes rigid leadership as the leader who is stiff and unyielding, although they may be competent, they are unable or unwilling to adapt to new ideas, new information, or changing times. Change happens faster and more often than ever before, information is more readily available. According to Kellerman, leaders who refuse or do not take into consideration information and willing to make changes ultimately result in bad leadership. These types of individuals are stubborn and refuse to adapt in the changing world. Kellerman again believes that followers are partly responsible for the bad leadership because they too are rigid and unyielding.

‘Intemperate leaders lacks self-control and is aided and abetted by followers who are unwilling or unable effectively to intervene’ (Kellerman, 2004, p. 95). Intemperate leadership is a type of bad leadership that is unnecessary, careless and wasteful. Self-control is a personal obligation but was made public in such leaders as Gary Hart, Jesse Jackson Marion Barry, who
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had issues with drugs, money and sex. Kellerman argues that Barry’s followers were more responsible for what happened than the leader (2004). The followers were culpable and became enablers of their transgressions, followers continued to support and even vote for them to continue in office.

The callous leader and at least some followers are uncaring or unkind, ignoring or discounting the needs, wants and wishes of most members of the organization (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman (2004) refers to callous leaders as either self-destructive or lacked emotional intelligence, these types of leaders cannot seem to bring themselves to even have minimal respect for their followers.

Corrupt leaders lie, cheat or steal to a degree that exceeds the norm, they put self-interest ahead of public interest (Kellerman, 2004). Insular leadership minimize or disregard the health and welfare of the other, those outside the group or organization for which they are directly responsible for (2004). Evil leadership commit atrocities, use pain as an instrument of power.

Critical Assessment

Kellerman addresses the dark side of leadership, the side that many do not want to discuss or avoid. Kellerman (2004) states that bad leadership is a phenomenon so ubiquitous that our bookshelves should be stacked with books on the subject but they are not. The subject is avoided because bad leadership is located in what Harlan Cleveland refers to as the untidy world of human relations (2004). Because of the lack of studies on bad leadership, Caudwell (n.d.) contends that Kellerman based her analysis on hundreds of case studies and develops her own typology by listing seven distinct categories of bad leadership: incompetent; rigid; intemperate; callous; corrupt; insular; evil, which she illustrates with eye-opening accounts of well-known bad
leaders. She then prescribes some best leadership practices, designed to constrain such baboon-ish behavior (n.d.).

Kellerman argues that there would not be bad leadership if not for bad followership. Kellermans real life examples of the seven types of leadership expresses her belief that followers play an important part in bad leadership and in some cases the follower is more responsible than the leader. Kellerman does succeed in demonstrating that followers are frequently implicated in the sins of the leader (Caudwell, n.d.).

Kellerman (2004) contends that leaders behave badly because of who they are and what they want. She believes that leadership studies have overemphasized leader’s traits and underemphasized other important areas such as the situation, nature of the task at hand, and the followers (2004). Kellerman encourages the abandonment or to at least resist the dominant model, the leader centered model, and embrace a more holistic approach that leaders should be looked at only in tandem with their followers (Caudwell, n.d.). Kellerman’s view on leadership studies is new and refreshing by focusing and laying responsibility of bad leadership on the followers.

Kellerman describes two categories of bad leadership, ineffective and unethical. She states that this is not based on theoretical construct but rather empirical evidence. Bad leadership is based on Kellermans observations of the examples she provided in the book. Kellerman does provide some powerful examples of leaders gone bad. Campbell, Whitehead and Finkelstein (2009) describe the presence of inappropriate self-interest as one of the reasons leaders make bad decisions. This self-interest biases the emotional importance of information received which in turn makes the leader perceive what he wants to see (2009). Kellerman agrees that self-interest
is a key that influence bad leadership. Kellerman states her case by maintaining that the single best explanation of why leaders lead and followers follow is self-interest. This is the case whether its good leadership or bad leadership.

Kellerman provides examples of each type of the bad leadership categories and breaks these down into the context of the leader, the followers, the web the leaders have weaved and are entangled in, and the benefits of hindsight. Kellerman lays these examples out to prove her point that bad leadership exists because of bad followers. Caudwell (n.d.) contends that Kellerman, by her own admission, both the ineffective/unethical distinction, and her own seven-fold typology are open to argument. She defends the pragmatic usefulness of these categories, but the lack of any theoretical underpinning remains a key weakness (n.d.).

Kellerman’s example of Bill Clinton was especially interesting. Kellerman describes Clinton as an insular leader in the Rwanda incident because of his lack of expertise in foreign affairs he did not become involved until it was too late while genocide was happening in Rwanda. Kellerman (2004) again blames the bad leadership on the followers, it was clearly not the Presidents responsibility alone. Caudwell (n.d.) maintains that Kellerman’s case studies remain at a descriptive or, at best, diagnostic level, and the closing sections for each example merely restate what went wrong, stopping well short of explanatory power. According to Caudwell (n.d.), Kellerman only provides what is already self-evident not any insights of the underlying cause of this insular behavior. After a detailed account of Bill Clinton’s inadequate response to the Rwandan genocide, Kellerman only concludes that, standing by and doing nearly nothing while eight hundred thousand people are being slaughtered in three months’ time is not acceptable (n.d.).
In Kellerman’s book on Followership, Abraham Park (2008) describes Kellerman’s followership analysis as more descriptive than prescriptive, she provides typology and very good examples but no real answers. Kellerman does the same in Bad Leadership, she provides a descriptive list of bad followers from bystanders to evildoers but not theoretical study on the subject.

Kellerman provides three assumptions about bad leadership. First, bad leadership cannot be stopped or slowed by changing human nature; second bad leadership cannot be stopped or slowed without stopping and slowing bad followership; thirdly, bad leadership cannot be stopped or slowed by sticking our heads in the sand (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman (2004) further maintains that bad leaders will not become good leaders unless they calculate the costs of bad leadership as greater than the costs of good leadership and they calculate the benefits of good leadership as greater than the benefits of bad leadership. As Kellerman continually contends that followers are responsible for good leadership and bad leadership, she does so again in her conclusion. Kellerman (2004) states, ‘bad leadership will not, cannot, be stopped or slowed unless followers take responsibility for rewarding good leaders and penalizing the bad ones (p. 232).

Caudwell’s (n.d.) reflection on Kellerman’s analysis of bad leadership is straightforward and her categories of badness do provide a useful framework for talking about leadership problems, but for explanations of underlying causes there needs to be deeper analysis.

Kellerman has an issue with some definitions of leadership, in particular James MacGregor Burns. Burns’ definition that leadership is an ethical act is contrary to Kellermann's thinking that leadership can also be unethical, Kellerman’s makes a good case that greater awareness of the dynamics of leadership, in particular bad leadership needs to be developed.
Kellerman is correct in her assertion that leadership studies have primarily focused on good leadership and not bad leadership.

**Personal Reaction**

Kellerman makes some very interesting points about bad leadership and bad followership. As I read through some of the examples, I can see her point that bad leadership does exist. Kellerman describes the seven types of bad leadership and how leaders arrive at this point. She classifies bad leaders into one of these categories, incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil.

Kellerman’s examples provided some insight into the leadership my workplace has experienced. In 2002, a new president was hired and installed at our college. At the time of hire, his style of leadership was very much needed, a lot of hands on, micro-managing and transactional leadership style. The president lacked the relationship skill in dealing with American Indian tribes and communities and lacked understanding in American Indian education. This was an important aspect because of the college’s historical relationship with American Indian tribes. Because of his lack of skill in this area, it caused some real problems and issues with various tribes, communities and students. He could be classified as an incompetent leader or bad leader in this particular area.

This was not the only issue. Over the years, the president became intemperate, lacked self-control in his spending even though the college was experiencing significant financial and cash flow issues. He could also be considered callous because of his disregard for the needs and wants of the members of the organization. Kellerman’s belief that followers have a hand in allowing bad leadership to continue may be true in this case.
Kellerman describes the case of Juan Antonio Samaranch’s, former president of the IOC, his followers were personally beholden to him rather than the games therefore any oversight was useless. Due to the lack of oversight, Samaranch mismanagement of his position led to his downfall and a black eye for the Olympics. In the particular case at the college, our board chair became so beholden to the president that she lacked the resolve to provide the correct oversight of the president. Because of her loyalty to the president, other board members were not accurately informed of the complete financial position and the treatment of employees. It was not until she was replaced that the true picture of the president’s leadership was revealed. Other followers, did not stand up and report any wrongdoings, they were mere bystanders. Eventually, there came a point where the followers were willing to stand up and make reports on the president’s misdeeds. Needless to say, the president has been forced to retire and a new interim president has been hired.

Bad leadership provided me a new perspective on leadership. My first thoughts of leadership have always been about good leadership. The leader has the best interest of the followers and achieving goals that are best for the common good. Kellerman’s Bad Leadership allows me to look closer at leadership and have a better understanding that the context of the situation and followers both has a part in leadership, good or bad.
References


