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Leadership and Influence

VCGU2002

Learning Portfolio: Part II

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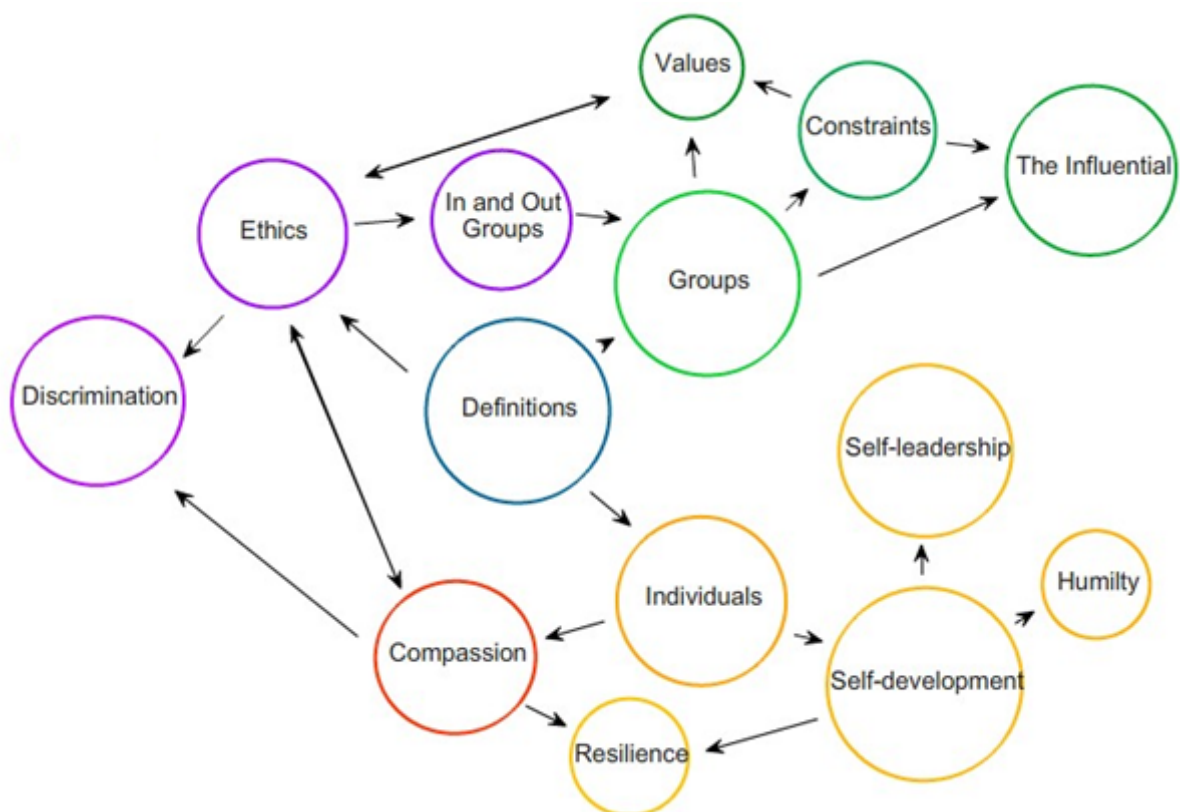
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Introduction

I believe that we spend our whole life striving to close the gap between the person we are, and the person we would like to be. Essential to this goal is a study of our experiences, lest the lessons that they teach escape our notice. VCGU2002 encouraged us to study our experiences of leadership and influence, and this was a rewarding endeavour. However, it paled in comparison to the chance to study the extensive experience of our guest speakers. Only three years into my first undergraduate degree, and I was being exposed to the lessons that others had taken a lifetime to learn and understand.

In this learning portfolio I will explore the practicality of general definitions of leadership, before demonstrating what the course has taught me about three of the most important aspects of leadership – how it affects groups, the individual, and its relationship with ethics.

I have included a mind-map that gives a general idea of how these concepts are related. I do not believe that any of the concepts can be seen to stand alone; they are all interdependent. As such, to investigate one is to develop a greater understanding of all the others at the same time.



Definitions of Leadership – Their use and abuse

Integral to almost any discussion of any topic is a definition of the topic at hand. However, when we try to formulate a definition of leadership, it either appears too narrow to fully encapsulate what we want it to describe, or so broad as to be, practically speaking, useless. Additionally, as Michael Platow observed in week four, our definition of leadership defines how we assess its effectiveness in the field, which throws up its own set of problems.

For example, we might accept Platow's definition of leadership as 'the process by which one or more members of a group influence other group members in a way that motivates them to contribute to the achievement of group goals'. However, this definition excludes parents from being considered leaders, even though they guide and facilitate the development of their children, they provide inspiration, and they delegate tasks for their children to complete; three things that we consider important to many forms of leadership.

The problem of defining leadership was further emphasised by Keith Houghton in week five when he showed us a Venn diagram describing the relationships between management, leadership and inspiration (Figure 1).

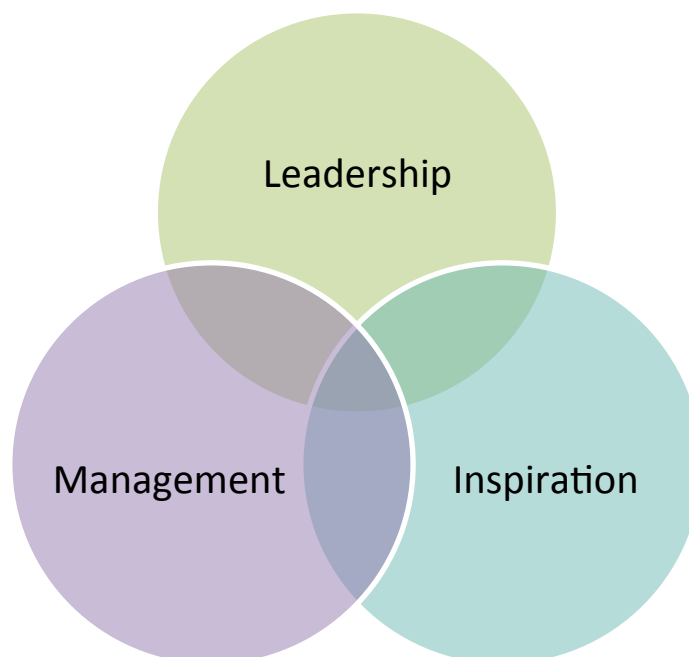


Figure 1.

By displaying the relationship like this, Houghton challenged my preconception of leadership as something independent of either management or inspiration. Whilst this type of leadership does exist, it doesn't describe the full range of leadership styles available.

Platow's definition would clearly fit with within simple leadership, or perhaps, within the intersection of leadership and inspiration. But my conception of a parent would fit more towards the centre. The genius of this diagram lies in its ability to succinctly illustrate how interdependent leadership is with other skills, skills that may be more or less important depending on context and the ability of the leader.

Gender and definitions

Traditionally, leadership has been considered the domain of males and many of the defining characteristics that we attribute to great leaders often have masculine connotations, e.g. strong, aggressive, competitive... and 'ballsy'. As Sarah Pearson noted in week six, females often have to adopt some of these traits if they are to be taken seriously as leaders. However this can subvert their femininity, something that is often a central part of their identity. Additionally, females who embody these masculine traits are often seen in a negative light – an aggressive female is 'pushy'.

Before this part of the course, I had no idea the problems females faced in positions of authority. As a white male, I have only ever found the preconceptions surrounding leadership to be useful guidelines on how to succeed. However, I don't think I would be prepared to sacrifice elements of my identity to conform to these guidelines, as many women are asked to do. But even if the impact on those who conform was minimal, we risk losing exposure to a wider variety of leadership styles that might offer insights into how to improve our own. Thus the cultural exclusion of feminine women from participating fully as leaders not only damages them, but it has wider implications for the improvement of society in general.

From this analysis of gender, we can see that usefulness of definitions of leadership are limited. The gender bias in the language of leadership is a clear example of the restrictions definitions place on us, especially if our definitions are influenced by cultural norms.

Reflection:

Throughout the course we had numerous examples of what it meant to be a leader detailed to us by the guest speakers, but each of these examples were unique, and some would be useless outside certain contexts. For example, Peter Lau emphasized in week five the importance of being an expert in something in order to be respected by your subordinates. However this approach would not be of any use when working in an environment outside of your usual field of knowledge. Rather, it would be more effective to follow Sham Sara's advice from week two and adopt a leadership position with great humility, letting others know that you do not know everything, but are willing to work hard to make sure you understand the job you have been tasked with completing.

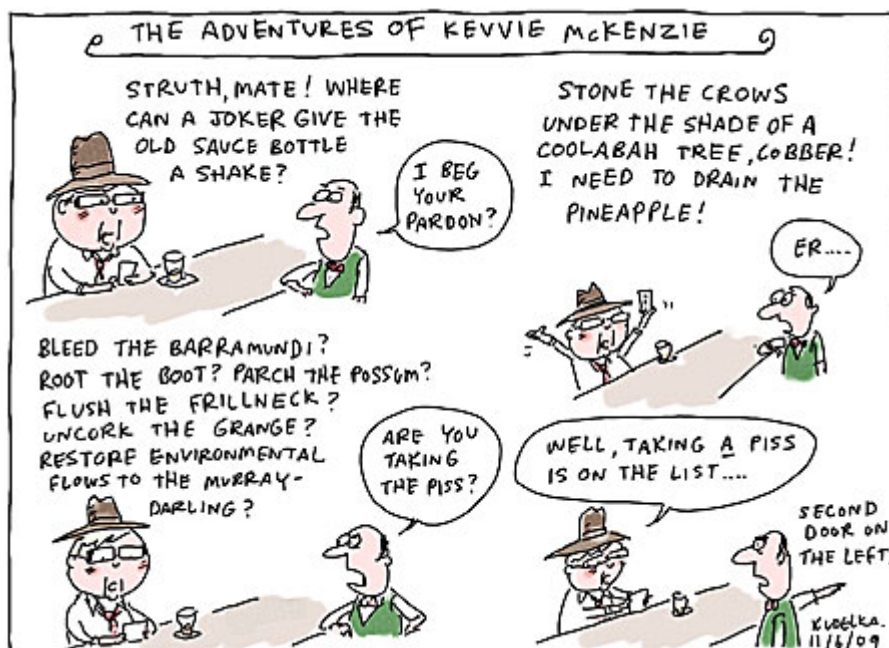
Leadership and the Group

Leadership requires followers. It is therefore incredibly important to understand the relationship between leaders and the groups of followers that they lead.

Values and Groups

Michael Platow's emphasis on the importance of group identity to leadership really struck a chord with me. I have always wondered how leaders were restricted by the group they sought to lead, and here Platow offered a testable hypothesis which my scientific background immediately found appealing. When I considered the various leaders I knew who had suffered backlashes from their followers, the backlash usually occurred when the leader appeared to be disconnected from their followers; unable to identify with their values and beliefs. For example, the recent Qantas industrial relations crisis was exacerbated when CEO Alan Joyce accepted a wage increase, whilst, at the same time, he advocated for the redundancies of large number of employees. His inability to show solidarity with the members of the group he leads produced disastrous consequences, as the group looked for someone who could represent their values better.

I think that when taking a leadership role, it is important to remember the values of the group that one leads, and show that as their leader, you also identify with these values. Politicians are particularly aware of this, as Kevin Rudd's awkward attempts at appearing down to earth illustrated.

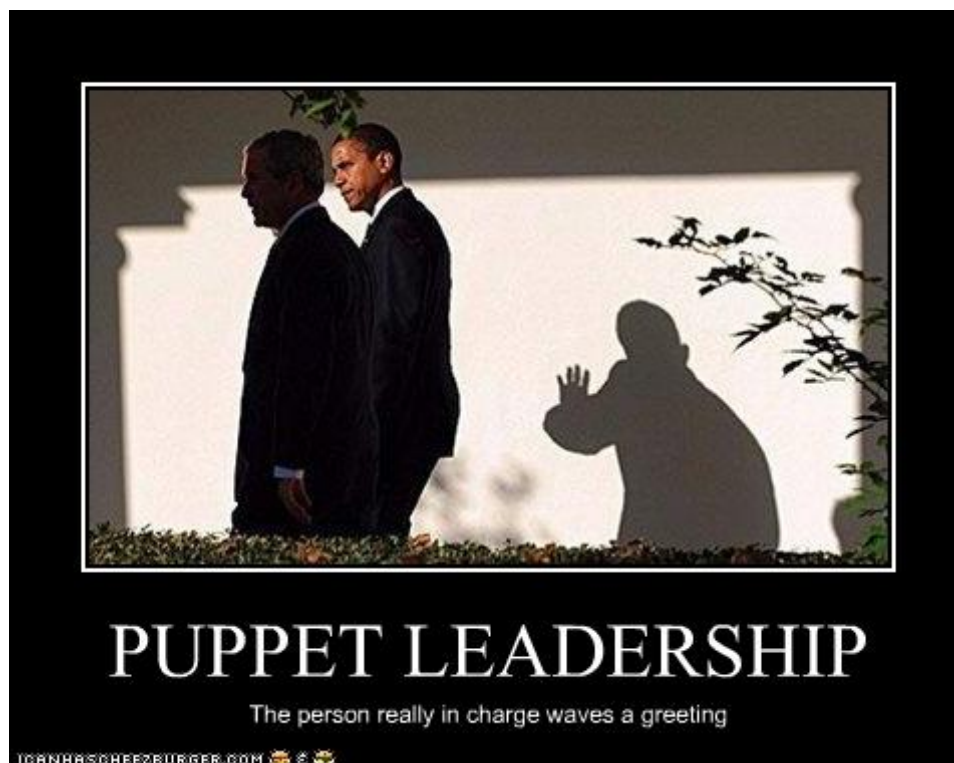


The Influential and Leadership

To lead is obviously to influence, but to influence is not necessary to lead. Consider a wealthy patron of an art gallery. Although the director of the gallery is clearly its leader, the wealthy patron has an obvious influence on the direction that the gallery takes for each exhibition. During this course, examples of this sort of relationship occurred often.

In week one, Richard Baker described some of the leaders he found inspirational and some of them, particularly the ones from aboriginal communities, had no obvious leadership roles. Rather, their positions within the community as mothers or elders, granted them respect and thus a large degree of influence.

This provides an interesting counterpoint to Michael Platow's speech in week four. He emphasized the importance of social identity when characterising the mechanisms of leadership, but he didn't mention the impact that the influential have in shaping that identity. For example, elders are integral to the social identity of many indigenous communities. Thus, anyone hoping to take an overt leadership role within the community would need their support in order for their vision to be seen as compatible with the social identity of the individuals of that community.



This need for the support of the influential is clearly seen in American politics. Without the funding afforded by large corporations or the backing of key religious leaders, politicians not only have trouble convincing others of their message, they often are unable to spread it at all. I think the above picture sums it up perfectly. Despite the public appearance of the

President as representing the people of the USA, they also have to negotiate with their private backers who keep them in their position of power.

Despite the obvious problems leaders face when negotiating with influential individuals and groups, there are some major advantages to working with the influential. By identifying those who have influence and getting them to share in your vision, you can spread your message faster than might otherwise have been possible. Leadership, as Angus Houston emphasised, is all about relationships, and relationships with the right individuals can make or break the authority one carries as a leader.

Reflection:

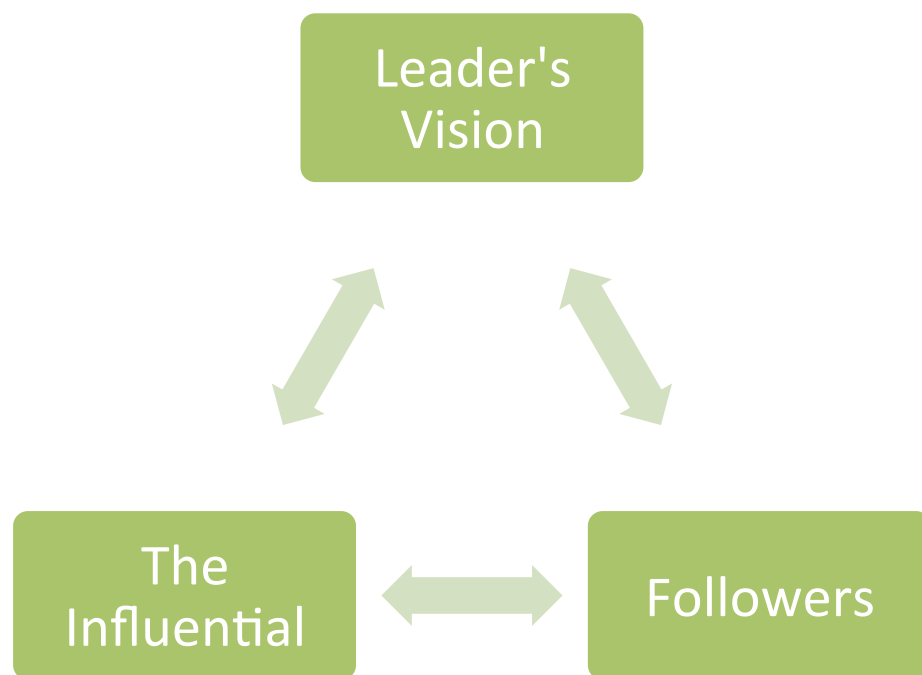


Figure 2.

In Figure 2, I have illustrated how a leader's vision, their followers, and the influential all interact and exert pressure on one another. An effective leader is able to manage these interactions.

Leadership and the Individual – Cultivating the Mindset

Throughout the course I found that we strayed into a territory I would not have normally associated with leadership: the cultivation of the mind. We kept returning to the importance of self-development, and how reflecting on ones experiences is a necessary part of it. I soon realised that too often I ignored the lessons inherent in my own experiences, and simply let the chance to avoid repeating my mistakes pass me by. Geoff Mortimore's SMART+ plan was extraordinarily useful for identifying and improving on aspects of my behaviour, and Robert Styles' emphasis on mindsight complemented Mortimore's approach perfectly.

Mindsight

Mindsight is simply our ability to observe our own thoughts and feelings, and to place them inside a greater context. I always think of Geoff Mortimore's example of a person engaged in an emotional debate in Week 8. All too often we lose sight of our primary purpose by focusing on defending our own ego. Sometimes, we simply need to observe our own thoughts and feelings, and to acknowledge them for what they are. Just this simple process of identifying the feeling, i.e. 'I feel threatened', and placing it in the context of the debate, may help us realise that we have strayed from our initial intentions of achieving a productive outcome.

Angus Houston illustrated this technique when he discussed the time he was tasked with transferring a squadron of helicopters from the Air Force to the Navy, despite the opposition to the move by members of both these forces. He acknowledged his own reluctance to implement the plan, but also recognised that his primary purpose was to do the job he was tasked with. Houston demonstrated great leadership when he reminded the men who opposed the plan exactly what their obligations were, and outlined how they would be required to fulfil them, thus separating their egotistical concerns from their jobs.

It is this ability to separate task and ego that I would love to emulate. I have often found myself distracted from the primary course of a discussion by a need to defend my ego from an imagined slight.

Humility

Every leader that spoke to us during the course emphasised the importance of humility. Ron Brent, as our first guest speaker, listed it as one of his five characteristics of effective leaders. For him it was important because it was part of listening and learning, two processors that I think leaders need to have to remain not only engaged with their vision, but their followers as well.

I initially viewed humility with scepticism because I had made the assumption that great leaders had no need for it. I thought great leaders already had all the answers, like Aslan in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and thus had little need for humility. However, I have

come to realise that nobody could possibly have all the answers, and thus humility is essential to any form of leadership that is not dictatorial.

Resilience

Not having all the answers necessarily means that sometimes we fail. When we let down ourselves, it hurts, but it is not too hard to pick ourselves up again. When we let down our followers, our supporters, and those that love us, the guilt and shame can force us to stay on our knees. The failure of a leader often falls into the second category, and so a leader needs greater resilience than is usually required.

Kerry Arabena offered some incredible insights into how to strengthen one's resilience. She spoke of times when she felt shame, regret and anxiety, but she also spoke of their temporary nature, and of our control over how we feel about them. She suggested that we should only whinge for two weeks maximum, when things go pear shaped. After that it is time to get back on the horse. Arabena also suggested getting a dog.

What I take from this last statement is this – find the people that love you, and surround yourself with them. Their love will make you feel worthwhile, even when you have fallen hard. The only reason a dog might be occasionally preferable is because they love you for very little in return. Alternatively, we just need to find a way to internalise that feeling of being loved, so that even if everything is taken away from us, we still can be resilient. How do we do this?

Compassion

Compassion is more than simply empathizing with another person; it is also about having the desire to relieve their suffering. Compassion can also be self-directed, so that one can create a generally loving countenance towards themselves.

Angus Houston illustrated why outward compassion was important to leadership with his belief that when you look after people, they will look after you. By extending a compassionate attitude to those around you, you encourage them to establish one towards you as well.

However to truly show compassion, one must be 'wholehearted', as Brené Brown would say (Week two). To be wholehearted is to accept our own vulnerability, and to accept this vulnerability in others. Only by acknowledging vulnerability can we hope to develop ways of coping with it, perhaps by getting others to fill the gaps in our abilities, as Ron Brent suggested in week one.

Reflection

As a result of this theme of the course, I feel better prepared to ask for help when I need it, and to offer help to others. This exchange of help not only strengthens relationships, but it also helps to develop me as a person, as it becomes easier to identify areas in need of improvement. And finally, by admitting to myself regularly that I am vulnerable, that I am not infinitely capable, maybe when I do fall, I will not have to deal with the additional problems of a bruised ego.

Ethical Leadership

Thus far I have focused on understanding leadership concepts, and how we develop them. However, they have not addressed how leadership should be used. Whilst the course focused primarily on understanding leadership, there was the underlying assumption that it should not be abused, that it, and the person who possesses it, should possess integrity. Essential to this idea of integrity is the idea of ethical behaviour. It is here that I wish to address how leadership and ethics combine.

Leadership, on most occasions, involves a concentration of large amounts power and influence into the hands of either a small group, or a single individual. What concerns me here is what constitutes the ethical use of this power and influence, and how do I make sure that I stay within these bounds? This particular area of leadership often crossed over with my philosophy courses on ethics and I found myself contemplating their relationship often. How important is leadership to developing ethical norms in society, and how important are ethical norms to effective leadership?

Harmony of individuals

Ethical behaviour seems geared towards creating harmonious societies as well as protecting the interests of individual, and so it seems that ethical leadership should aim to do the same. Indigenous leadership often focuses on this harmony of society. In Week Seven, a reading called "Stories from the circle: Leadership lessons learned from aboriginal leaders" illustrated how indigenous conceptions of leadership emphasise this importance of social harmony, both between individuals, and between individuals and nature. As one respondent to an interview conducted by the authors said;

"I find it very difficult for me to speak of myself in a leadership role because I see myself as a servant and not as a leader. I think that's the best kind of leader, but I find it very difficult to think of myself in that way [as a leader], never mind talk about it."

This conception of oneself as a servant suggests that the speaker considers their own interests secondary to the harmony of their community. Peter Radoll reinforced this concept when he said that the first thing he considers when making an important decision, is how the decision will impact his community.

It is clear that the ethical norms in indigenous societies are reinforced by the leaders, although it is not clear whether the leaders are responsible for the ethical norms in the first place.

In or Out

Indigenous leaders often focus on their own communities when discussing harmony. How does their notion of harmony extend beyond these boundaries? Michael Platow talked about how group members tend to see how their leader behaves in two ways: either the leader is acting so to further the interests of the 'in-group', or they are acting so as to further the interests of the 'out-group'. If a leader is seen to be compromising the interests of the 'in-group', they lose their legitimacy to lead. The ethical norms of a society can be seen as integral to its interests, and so leaders are heavily constrained by these norms. This is particularly obvious in countries where religion strongly influences political debates. Religion emphasizes the importance of certain ethical norms over others, and politicians are often compelled to pay lip service to these ethical norms in order to retain the support of religious groups.

The Ethical Treatment of the Out

The problem with this 'in' and 'out' group mentality is when the 'in' group demands unethical treatment of the 'out'. During our online discussion in Week 12, my group talked about the Islamophobia that gripped the USA after 9/11, and the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany.



'Ethical Leadership - What not to do'

Primarily, we were concerned with how the leaders in both situations approached the demands of the 'in' group. Adolf Hitler notably encouraged the anti-Semitism, and used it to increase his own power over Germany. George Bush, on the other hand, never obviously worked against Islamophobia, and the practise of singling out Muslims for airport security scans only encouraged it. Our group agreed that regardless of the demands of the 'in' group, it is impermissible for a leader to encourage the unethical treatment of those on the 'out'.

Thus, not only must a leader consider the interests of the group that they lead, they are also bound by general ethical standards in what they can do to out-groups.

But how is one meant to act ethically as a leader when the 'in-group' demands something unethical? Leaders in business often confront these problems because on one hand, their duty is to the share holders and the share holders are interested in profit, whilst on the other hand, they have a generally duty to uphold certain ethical standards that might reduce potential profit. Keith Houghton outlined an example where a new leader suspected a colleague of fraudulently acquiring extra money for a research project at a university. The complication: the colleague was supported by two senior professors. Whilst this scenario is not strictly business, it does deal with many of the same issues a business would have to. How should the leader respond?

Tutorial response:

This question was put forward to us in a group, and there were three main responses to the problem, as summarized in the chart below.

	Do Nothing	Report Him	Handle it Unofficially
Reasoning behind action	You do not have hard evidence that he has actually committed a crime, and additionally, the support of the two senior professors is too important to risk. Additionally, by revealing the crime, you risk damaging the reputation of the department.	You suspect a crime and it is a straightforward act to request an audit of the accounts to find where the discrepancy comes from. Regardless of the effect it has on your future leadership, it is important to do the right thing.	Obviously a culture has been established where it is okay to obtain funds illegally. By sitting everyone down, saying that you have noticed a discrepancy but will only follow it up if it continues to appear, you might be able to put an end to the corruption without hurting anyone's ego.
Best consequence	Perpetrator continues to abuse the system, but senior professors continue to support your leadership. However, you risk a future administrator identifying you as somebody who enabled this illegal behaviour.	Once the audit has been carried out, you lose the support of the two senior professors, regardless of the outcome of the report. It is likely that you would have to resign, if only to avoid further conflict. You have also damaged the reputation of the department and the individual at the centre of the issue.	The perpetrator stops fraudulently taking funds and the two professors continue to support you. However, by not investigating you run the risk that a future administrator might consider you to have covered up fraud.

In the context of strong leadership, I think 'Handle it Unofficially' offers the best chance of reducing the impact of the fraudulent activity whilst at the same time keeping the reputation of the department intact. By showing that you are willing to risk your own reputation to protect that of the department, you will also surely engender loyalty from the senior professors. However, the ethics of this approach are dubitable, in that we have quite clear guidelines in place with regards to fraud, and you could therefore be considered at least an accomplice in the fraud if you were aware of it, but chose to actively ignore it.

All three of the responses have their own ethical problems, and it seems in this scenario, regardless of what one does, it is important to do it decisively and without fear. As Ian Chubb said in Week eight, we should not show fear. Fear becomes a chink in our armour

that others might use to get us to work for their own advantage, which in turn distracts us from acting as ethically as we can.

Additionally, Ian Chubb emphasised the importance of making decisions quickly once you have all the information, arguing that more time to mull over the facts will rarely produce better results. Angus Houston seemed to agree, believing that there is good reason to follow your intuition.

I have never really gotten along with my intuition, due to my faith in the scientific method. Careful scrutiny is necessary for good decisions. As such, crisis where I have to act fast frighten me, because I am unable to consider the problem from every possible angle. However, more often than not, I have tended to follow my first instinctual reaction to big decisions. I think a little more faith in my instinct might be rewarding, especially in situations like Keith Houghton's example, where careful consideration is unlikely to produce an ideal solution.

Group Presentations

The Nature of Group work:

An interesting theme that came up in all the group presentations was the nature of group work. The dynamic of each group was unique, and many of them dealt with conflict during the course. My group did not have any of these problems, but we all understood that to be a lucky coincidence. It is unlikely that all the groups that I will ever work in will avoid conflict, so it was fascinating to learn how other groups dealt with it. Essential to dealing with conflict is understanding it, and I thought that Group 3's chart describing the Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing stages of group work was fantastic. By including conflict as part of a normal group dynamic, and showing how it gets resolved in the norming stage, the chart emphasises the benefits of conflict in producing and acting on creative ideas. But I think what was particularly insightful was the acknowledgement that compromises need to be made in order to progress past the conflict stage.

The Many different Views:

Part of the difficulties associated with group work involved the many different views the members of the group brought to the table, partly due to the multidisciplinary nature of the course and partly due to our different personal histories. These views often conflicted and all the groups mentioned one particular topic that proved challenging to maintaining a harmonious group discussion: gender and leadership. For example, Group 12 discussed on their blog the division that quotas produced in their group, however they also agreed that this division meant that a wider variety of approaches were discussed that might have been missed had their opinions been unanimous. This unity of opinion often happened in our group and thus there were limits to how much we could learn from each other on some of the topics in this course. Our best discussion occurred when at least one of us played the

devil's advocate because we were able to delve into some of the more nuanced aspects of the topic.

The Generalities

What fascinated me most about the group talks was that despite the huge differences in their compositions, the lessons that were distilled from the course were similar across all groups. It seems that although individuals might place emphasis on different aspects of the course due to their own personal history, groups of individuals seem to emphasise aspects that have a certain universal appeal. I acknowledge that there were things that were unique to each group, but on the whole they picked up on very similar themes. I think that this might be because groups have to work in a language that includes everyone, and it is only possible to do that by restricting the discussion to generalities most people easily grasp.

Final Individual Talks

How we have affected each other:

It was striking to hear that much of the knowledge we had gained from this course actually came from our interactions with each other in group forums and the tutorial activities. Richard Keys spoke about how he, and the rest of his group, found that the one thing they had in common was a mutual hatred of group work, and Isobel Roper concurred, describing her dread when she learned that much of the course's assessment would depend on group work. However, despite this initial reluctance, they both believed that they had benefited from the interactions. Richard in particular noted that it helped him see leadership in a new light, as something more than his old view of it as a tool that gives one authority over others. Others noted the benefits of the cross-disciplinary nature of the course which exposed them to modes of thinking that they had not encountered before. I think this has been particularly useful for me, as I haven't had the chance to work closely with many people outside chemistry and philosophy. But what was more fascinating was learning to understand why people may take a particular position by placing it in the context of their life history. Angela Samuels has lived a life very different from my own and confronted some very trying situations. Thus, she seemed much more aware of the fragility of our current standards of living and was, in turn, more aware of the threats to these standards than I was.

The importance of a holistic view of leadership:

Richard's old view of leadership is only one, sadly all too frequently seen, form leadership can take. Many of the speakers emphasised the importance of subtle leadership, where one offers support to their followers and works at empowering them to achieve greater things, rather than the stereotypical aggressive leadership style. But other speakers emphasised different styles that resonated most with them, and it seems overall that the group generally acknowledged the validity of a wide range of leadership forms. Elizabeth Proctor was particularly interesting in this context, as she seemed to be prepared to modify her

usual approach in order to convey her message on climate change more effectively, thus not just recognising another leadership style, but actively practising it.

The difference between leaders and followers:

Sean McKenzies made a fascinating point that, once again, challenged my preconceived notion of leadership. He noted that sometimes the first person to do something is not always a leader. Rather, it can be the first people that join them that actually exhibit leadership. I think that this is because innovators often pursue things solely for their own pleasure; they don't always try to engage others. However, the first adopters of innovation are often the first to encourage others to adopt as well, and thus can be considered to take a leadership role. This just highlighted for me the extreme dependence any leadership endeavour has on followers, influencers and the context in which that endeavour takes place. It does not seem like there is any place for a solitary leader.