

Working Paper

Series

Leaders with Disabilities: Still a Splendid Deception?

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ISSN 1038-7448
No.WP 99/6 (July 1999)

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Abstract

This paper explores leadership in western cultures as a social construction (Berger & Luckman 1976). Crawford (1992) describe social construction as being the way an individual relates to the social. In this case, it is the complex and multifaceted picture that we have of what leadership is and of the people who lead. One of the characteristics of this social construction is that leaders are non-disabled, thus, in organisations, leaders with disabilities are a contradiction. Two factors are identified as significantly contributing to this situation. First, images of disability in popular culture are the antithesis of images of leadership. Second, the few people with disabilities who are leaders learn to act 'as if' they do not have disabilities, that is, they protect themselves, their colleagues and their positions by 'passing' as non-disabled. This paper argues that in the same ways that organisations and organisation theorising has had to address issues raised by the growing participation in management by members of other minorities, it will, inevitably have to begin to address the psychological and social issues raised for organisation members when their leaders and managers include people who are disabled and proud of it.

I am an invisible man
No, I am not a spook...
I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -
and I might even be said to possess a mind
I am invisible, understand,
simply because people refuse to see me (Ellison 1989, p 3)

Introduction

Franklin Roosevelt is considered one of the great recent leaders. He was a man with significant mobility impairment, yet this was deliberately and cleverly hidden from view. Although there are over thirty-five thousand photographs of FDR at the Presidential Library only two show him using a wheelchair (Gallagher 1994). Throughout his Presidency, Roosevelt, his family and staff, the secret service and the military went to inordinate lengths to hide from the American people the extent of their President's physical impairment. The Press were also part of this conspiracy, not photographing Roosevelt using a wheelchair, not reporting when he fell, not mentioning his impairment (Gallagher 1994). This is in direct contrast to the way the American press has handled the physical misfortunes of American Presidents who have not been disabled (such as the falls of Gerald Ford or Bill Clinton's knee injury).

Gallagher (1994) has called this conspiracy "FDR's Splendid Deception", but this paper will argue that the deception was not FDR's alone, nor that of those close to him. It was part of a larger phenomenon that still exists today. This paper puts the proposition that leadership in western cultures is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman 1976). Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, and Benton (1992) describe social construction as being the way an individual relates to the social. In this case, it is the complex and multifaceted picture that we have of what leadership is and of the people who lead. One of the characteristics of the dominant construction of leaders is that they are able bodied. The social construction is not just one that includes the absence of disability, it contains a positive bias towards a physical character of a particular type (tall, white, male). Thus, in organisations, leaders with disabilities are a contradiction. This is why little mention is made of them in the leadership and diversity literature and why, when we are seeing a growth in the study of the experiences of leaders in organisations who belong to other minorities (eg women, people of colour, lesbians and gay men), studies of the experience of leaders with disabilities are almost non existent. We are still engaging in a 'splendid deception', pretending that they don't exist. But they do and our numbers are growing.

This paper presents some initial thoughts on why managers and leaders with disabilities are absent from the diversity literature. It is speculated that on the one hand, there is still a general perception that people with disabilities are to be managed, not the managers. Second, and more controversially, I suggest that when people with disabilities are in leadership positions, they and their colleagues engage in a conspiracy of silence. They collectively engage in the deception that the impairment does not exist.

The presence of leaders with disabilities in organisations

In western societies, the number of people in the workforce with a disability is growing, although the majority of people with disabilities who wish to work still cannot find employment (Barton 1996; Maddox 1994). The number of leaders with disabilities is probably also increasing. As people age, the chances that a person will acquire an impairment also increases (Abberley 1997). Given that leaders in organisations tend to be older than the general workforce, one would expect to find a significant percentage of leaders have a physical impairment of some kind.

People with disabilities in western nations are generally more visible and more actively involved in all aspects of social life (including work) now, than they have been since the industrial revolution (Charlton 1998; Oliver 1996). The growing disability rights movement is credited with improving the status of people with disabilities and anti-discrimination legislation such as the ADA (USA) and DDA (Australia) exists in many countries (Rayner 1992). People with disabilities are now more likely to receive an education that equips them for paid work and have access to the types of educational programs typically undertaken by potential leaders such as MBA's. Technological developments (such as voice input and output software) have also made leadership more practical for people with physical impairments.

It could be expected that these changes would lead to more people with impairments becoming leaders in organisations, but if this has occurred it has not been reported in the literature and their experiences have not been the subject of study by researchers in the same way that the experiences of other minorities have been researched.

The absence of leaders and managers with disabilities from the management literature: Some speculations

The literature on women and work argues forcefully that until members of minorities are promoted into the management and leadership ranks, organisations can still be considered to be discriminatory (Helgeson 1990). The idea of promoting minority members into management ranks is also suggested as a strategy for developing workforce diversity and improving organisation effectiveness (Cope & Kalantzis 1997). Whereas there seems to be widespread acceptance (at least in the rhetoric of most organisations) that women and people of colour have a right to participate in the mainstream of organisational life and that factors that inhibit their full participation are worthy of study, this right (and the study of their experience) still seems to be denied to people with disabilities. The 'glass ceiling' (the barriers that prevent women from gaining positions of power and influence in organisations) has received much attention (Bass 1990). The equivalent barrier for people with disabilities (the 'chrome ceiling'), is largely ignored (Medgyesi 1996a). It seems that disability is not viewed as a topic for serious study (ie that it has no impact on one's ability to become a leader or on one's experience of being a leader) or it is assumed that few leaders have disabilities.

Popular culture and the presentation of people with disabilities

How is disability dealt with in the management and leadership literature? A quick review reveals an almost total absence of any discussion of managers and leaders with disabilities. Rather, disability is something to be managed by managers. The passing of the ADA in the United States and the DDA in Australia prompted a plethora of literature to help managers comply with the requirements of these laws (Campbell 1996; Dyck 1998; Masengarb 1994). It also resulted in a large number of 'good news stories', descriptions of how people with disabilities were succeeding in the workplace (Pickett 1995). But they were almost exclusively employees, not managers and the aim of the articles was usually to encourage other managers to consider employing people with disabilities. In fact, so important has it become to manage disability in North American organisations that a whole industry has developed to help leaders and managers in organisations 'manage' their disabled workers (Charlton 1998; Rioux & Bach 1994).

Despite contrary evidence, many employers still consider people with disabilities to be less reliable, less productive and less promotable than people without a physical impairment (Borsay 1997). This image is reinforced by the ways people with impairments are represented in popular culture. Two images of leaders with disabilities dominate. The leader whose disability is an outward manifestation of intrinsic evil and the leader whose disability has led to mental derangement.

Disabling stereotypes which medicalise, patronise, criminalise and dehumanise disabled people abound in books, films, on video, on television, and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. (Barnes 1992, p 39)

Popular culture includes examples of stereotypes of people with disabilities as leaders. A dominant stereotype is of the disabled leader as an evil person. Some examples are the various villains defeated by James Bond (eg Dr No).

Evil may be depicted as being the outcome of mental derangement brought on by the trauma of disability (Gilman 1988). Some examples would be the disabled leaders depicted in 'Dr Strangelove' and the 'Hunchback of Notre Dame'. These representations of leaders link disability with another concept that problematic in the leadership literature, sex, sexuality and sexual frustration (Hearn, Sheppard, Tancred-Sheriff & Burrell 1989). In each case, the fact that the person has an impairment leads to them being unfit to lead.

Richard III is the archetypal example of the fusion of leadership, disability and inherent evil (Norden 1994). "...disability is a synonym for bad...None of the great artists ever created images of angels with disabilities. Conversely, persons with disabilities have been associated through the ages with all that is bad" (Henderson & Bryan 1984, p 8).

Another stereotypical depiction of people with disabilities in popular culture is as helpless and passive (Begum 1996) victims. If they are to survive, let alone succeed, they need the protection of a powerful non-disabled leader. The popular story of the Elephant Man is a good recent example of this. They make loyal followers, but do not have the drive or determination required to be a leader.

Even though people with disabilities are now more often seen in public and in the workplace, this has done little to dispel these images. The average person is unlikely to spend time with someone with a significant impairment unless it is a family member (Charlton 1998), and family members have a more pessimistic views of people with disabilities succeeding in the workplace than do the people with disabilities themselves (Freedman & Fesko 1996). A form of apartheid still exists. People without disabilities

are not likely to form friendships with people with significant impairments, nor are they likely to marry them (Lyons, Sullivan, Ritvo & Coyne 1995). Given this lack of direct experience of people with disabilities, it is not surprising that these two stereotypes, the evil disabled leader and the dependent victim of disability still dominate. These stereotypes are the antithesis of the stereotype of a leader - strong (physically and emotionally), psychologically stable, independent and resilient (Sinclair 1998).

Recently a new stereotype of people with disabilities has emerged, the 'supercrip', a disabled leader who overcomes her or his disability and achieves great things (Medgyesi 1996b). This stereotype, while appearing on the surface to be more positive, actually, is in some ways, more dangerous. It suggests that people with disabilities can succeed at anything if they try hard enough. If they fail, it is not because of social or structural barriers or the prejudice of others, rather, it is because of a lack of tenacity, effort or courage (Maddox 1996; Medgyesi 1996b; Shakespeare 1997). The 'supercrips' are often young white men who are physically active. Their achievements are often in the area of sport or other physical activities (Medgyesi 1996b). They are not representative of the majority of people with disabilities, nor do their stories help people without disabilities develop a more positive image of people with disabilities as leaders. 'Just a few SuperCrips make it easy for the culture-at-large to say, "See, if you had enough gumption, you could change your life." Clearly, you lack the willpower and drive' (Longmore in Medgyesi 1996b, p 74)

The traditional image of people with disabilities is one that precludes them from holding leadership positions. They are depicted as being evil, maladjusted or weak. The newer image of the supercrip, pretends that the impairment does not exist. This stereotype is one that may be reinforced by some of those people with disabilities who are in leadership positions.

Passing

It is likely that the behaviours of those few people with disabilities who are in management and leadership roles contributes to this splendid deception. People without impairments socially construct leadership as a role for people without impairments. It is likely that people with impairments do the same. Often, for very good reasons linked to the issues raised above, they hide their disability. Even if it is evident, it may never be talked about and no accommodations will be made for it. '...(T)he primary way people still get accepted is to not be disabled in any perceivable way that annoys people or draws attention to what they can't do' (Wade in Medgyesi 1996b, p 74). Hockenberry (1995, p 217) describes his experience of working as a journalist.

I generally avoided the issue of disability...because the reaction of people if you brought it up too often reminded me of how blacks described what happened to uppity niggers in the early days of the civil rights movement...To whites, people who brought up the issue of race were violating the rules in some way...In my world, "uppity crips" were called by a different name: people with a "bad attitude"...If my non-crip friends ever discussed the issue of disability with me, it was to comment on my attitude. "John doesn't let things stop him," they would say. "Disability? Why that's the last thing you ever think of when you are with John."

This collective deception, collusion in a pretence that the person does not have an impairment, is referred to in the disability literature as 'passing' (Charlton 1998; Goffman 1963). French (1993, p 76) suggests that people with disabilities collude in the denial of their experience of disability for the following reasons:

1. To avoid other people's anxiety and distress.
2. To avoid other people's disappointment and frustration.
3. To avoid other people's disbelief.
4. To avoid other people's disapproval.
5. To live up to other people's ideas of 'normality'.
6. To avoid spoiling other people's fun.
7. To collude with other people's pretences.

It is not just leaders and managers with impairments that can be hidden who engage in this denial behaviours. People with obvious impairments try to 'pass' because "...denial of disability is totally rational given the situations we find ourselves in, and that to regard it as a psychopathological reaction is a serious mistake. We deny our disabilities for social, economic and emotional survival..." (French 1993, p 77).

Given the particular emphasis put on the importance of leaders and managers in organisations having the respect and support of their staff, it makes sense that a leader with a disability will attempt to 'pass' if she/he believes that to acknowledge the existence of an impairment would result in the creation of feelings such as anxiety, disbelief or disapproval.

Conclusions

There is a need to actively explore the experience of disability in the workplace for both disabled and non disabled people and in particular, I would argue that there is a pressing need to study the relationship between leadership and disability. One avenue of inquiry would be to explore the ways in which management education, human resource policies, work design and management practice can contribute to the development of a workplace that facilitates the integration of people with disabilities in a way that makes the most of their diversity rather than forcing them to 'pass'.

Another starting point would be to look at the lessons to be learnt from the study of the experience of other minority groups. The Disability Pride Movement has learnt from the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement and Gay Pride (among others). We can learn from the experience of members of other minorities who are striving to be leaders in organisations.

For this to occur, it is important that researchers start treating disability as a factor for consideration when doing research into leadership and management. Both qualitative and quantitative research that considers issues such as race or gender to be important should also address the issue of disability.

In the last twenty years, western societies have introduced a plethora of legislation aimed at creating greater access to employment for people with disabilities. However, it has not resulted in an integration of people with disabilities into the workforce. There seems to be little interest among organisation researchers into why this might be so. Equally worrying, is that while in the 1980's issues of concern to people with disabilities were often addressed in the EEO literature, they have largely disappeared from recent writings on diversity (eg Cope & Kalantzis 1997; Norton & Fox 1997). Sinclair (1998), in her recent book on leadership, discusses gender, race and sexual preference, but does not mention disability.

In the same ways that organisations and organisation theorising has had to address issues raised by the growing participation in management by members of other minorities, it will, inevitably have to begin to address the psychological and social issues raised for organisation members when their leaders and managers include people who are disabled and proud of it.

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