

Kellerman, Barbara (2004). *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters*. Boston, Harvard Business Publishing, 2004, 282

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been analyzed, categorized, and defined by many people over the years. Some feel it is an art, one must be born a leader, and some feel it is a science, leadership can be taught. According to Kellerman, recent trends in current American industry are to treat leadership as a science and she points out that there is a flood of books on the market that propose that the ideas and techniques contained therein will teach the reader or enable the organization to teach their managers and supervisors to be leaders. However, Kellerman's focus is not only on defining leadership as an art but also in highlighting that the leadership industry's current focus on teaching leadership is biased towards teachings that only define leadership and leaders as "good" and widely disregard examination of "bad" leaders and bad leadership. To that end, the book explores the case for including bad leadership in the overall definition of leadership by examining the case histories of some of history's most notorious leaders and balancing them with a look at some of history's more recent examples of bad leadership. Each leader, leaders who are the main focus of the chapter's leadership type (incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil), is given a review along with their followers to build the case for the learning to be sowed from such an analysis of these bad leaders. (Kellerman, 2004)

THESIS STATEMENT

Kellerman's thesis is simple, bad leadership is still leadership and bad leaders are still leaders. She relates this to the reader, presumed to be a member of the "leadership industry", by examining the current scholarly and industry focus on defining bad leaders with other terms such as "power wielders" and bad leadership as being ignored and undefined by current trending. Kellerman claims that we want to read about good leaders like John Adams and Jack Welch but ignore David Koresh and Warren Harding. She states that this natural inclination is akin to "avoiding the elephant in the room—bad leadership" and we refuse to compare our beloved leaders like Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Adolph Hitler. (Kellerman, 2004)

In its most simple form Kellerman's thesis is an examination of the semantics of the word leadership and the trend in schools and industry to define leadership in a positive light by relating that leaders, those deserving of the coveted literal title of "leader", are only good natured people with only the best interests of their followers at heart. Kellerman's overarching purpose is to convince the reader that focusing on "good" leadership while refusing to study bad leadership will result in us, leadership industry, not truly being subject matter experts on leadership because we have ignored to study leadership in all of its whole. Her proposition is, as she puts it, akin to a medical school teaching only *health* (good leadership) but ignoring *disease* (bad leadership).

(Kellerman, 2004)

MAIN POINTS

Kellerman's first and most important point is that leadership should not be defined in a limited manner as is mostly done, according to her, in today's leadership

industry. She argues again and again for a definition of leadership that acknowledges that bad leaders are leaders too and that in order to truly learn and teach leadership, we must resolve ourselves to this expanded definition of leaders and leadership and come to grips with the fact that leadership can be good and bad. (Kellerman, 2004)

Kellerman's next main point focuses on the argument that leaders behave the way they do because they possess certain traits and, more importantly, that people follow these bad leaders because we need someone to lead. Her driving focus here is that you cannot have a bad leader without bad followers, followers who either collude with the leader or refuse to acknowledge their bad leadership or do anything about it. Kellerman argues that the human need for authority, to "keep things simple" (Kellerman, 2004, p. 23).

Next, Kellerman provides the reader her definition of bad leadership. To this end, she provides two vantage points to consider in building the definition of bad leadership or a bad leader. One is that bad leaders are ineffective. The ineffective leader, according to Kellerman, is simply one who does not produce the changes desired by the followers. Two is that bad leaders are unethical. Kellerman defines the unethical leader as one who "...fails to distinguish between right and wrong" (Kellerman, 2004, p. 34). To enable a closer analysis of her definition, Kellerman categorizes or types each leader as:

Ineffective:

- Incompetent—leaders and some followers unable to make or create positive change.
- Rigid—leaders and some followers are unwilling to adapt innovation, information, or ignore changes around them.

- Intemperate—leaders are out of control and followers do nothing to stop it.

Unethical:

- Callous—leaders and at least some followers are mean and the needs of most followers are discarded.
- Corrupt—the corrupt leader and his or her followers are liars, cheaters, or thieves. They are destructively selfish in regards to the interests of their followers.
- Insular—the leader and at least some followers refuse or fail to acknowledge the destruction, genocide, or undoing of those outside their group.
- Evil—the leader and at least some followers use evil means to cause atrocious physical or mental harm to their followers or others.

Each leader Kellerman examines and their followers are given a thorough analysis balanced against these groups that she alleges each of her examined leaders and their followers can be grouped in (Kellerman, 2004).

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Kellerman only takes 12 pages from the book to convince the reader that bad leadership should be considered leadership and bad leaders should be considered leaders. While her points were salient, the reader is rushed through this portion of the book which could be argued as the most important step. However, Kellerman's argument, albeit brief, is well delivered and her argument for including bad leadership by highlighting the current leadership industry trend of focusing on bad leadership is fluidly presented to the

reader and easy to follow. As the reader begins this journey towards convincing on the term “bad leader” and “bad leadership”, there is a lot of unraveling that must take place. If the reader is a student of the teachings that Kellerman seeks to counter, a student of the “positive bias” she alludes to on page 3 (Kellerman, 2004), then her quick transition from her argument to the new definition including bad leadership is too brief and unconvincing and not without confusion. The 12 pages she uses to argue her case are just a tease, a tip of the iceberg towards what could have been presented and a little disappointing to the overall experience going into the book. Kellerman seemed to gloss over a subject that required more detailed analysis and support. She seemed to forget that the audience, the current leadership industry, had been presented material and teachings to the counter as part of their embodiment into the industry and would need more convincing than she provided. To be fair, she does admit this and even makes it part of her argument by attacking the leadership industry’s use of only the positive leadership side of leading and allegedly ignoring the dark side but it’s not enough for the learned reader. In his book *Thinking About Leadership* author Nannerl Keohane states, “As Erasmus, Machiavelli’s contemporary, firmly stated: ‘Only those who dedicate themselves to the state, and not the state to themselves, deserve the title ‘prince’. For if someone rules to suit himself and assesses everything by how it affects his own convenience, then it does not matter what title he bears: in practice he is certainly a tyrant, not a prince” (Keohane, 2010, p. 41). It’s this definition of a leader that Kellerman is trying to counter. She is trying to convince the reader in only 12 pages that Hitler and Stalin deserve the title “leader” instead of tyrant or “power wielder” (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman gets to the heart of her argument for redefining the title of leader and leadership on page 12 of the book,

“Most folks use the word *leader* as it has always been used: to refer to any individual who uses power, authority, and influence to get others to go along” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 12). She goes on to argue that all common definitions of leadership are “value-free” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 12) and that this misleading use of definitions leads us, the populace, to believe that comparing a good leader with a bad one is like comparing apples with oranges but Kellerman asserts it is indeed comparing apples with apples (Kellerman, 2004, p. 12). This is truly where Kellerman failed to expand her argument. Kellerman tries in 5 paragraphs on pages 8 and 9 to counter Pulitzer Prize winner, James MacGregor Burns’ definition of leadership, “Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain purposes and motives mobilize...institutional, political, psychological and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 18). Kellerman’s counter was that Burns’ definition was exclusive of leaders like Hitler whom Burns referred to as “Power Wielders” (Kellerman, 2004). While Kellerman’s entire argument for including bad leaders as “leaders” is noble, her 12 short pages fail to fully convince the reader to go with her and against the likes of Burns. Most readers will leave Kellerman’s argument in favor of Burns’, “All leaders are actual or potential power holders but not all power holders are leaders” (Burns, 1978, p. 18). If Kellerman would have expanded her arguments and provided more support for her stand, it’s possible that the reader would not leave those 12 pages somewhat unconvinced or confused but with a true sense of intrigue and a new definition of leadership. Instead, the reader embarks into her proposed new definition of leadership still skeptical and therefore somewhat reluctant to go along and unfortunately for

Kellerman, this reluctance never really leaves the unconvinced reader but does leave them wanting more.

Kellerman next uses 33 pages of text to explain why bad leaders do what they do and breaking down her categories of bad leadership. Kellerman does a much better job of categorizing and typing what she calls bad leadership than some other texts that have tried. For instance, in his book *Driven to Lead: Good, Bad, and Misguided Leadership* author Paul Lawrence defines Bad Leadership as, “The exercise—by a person-w/o-conscience—of influence over followers so that the leader maximizes the fulfillment of his or her drive to acquire...by any means possible and without regard to the consequences for others” (Lawrence, 2010, p. 82). Lawrence’s approach in defining bad leadership and then other types like evil and good was more confusing and less attainable than Kellerman’s categorizations. In these pages of the text Kellerman explains why followers follow leaders who behave badly. Her argument that, “...We can’t expect to reduce the number of bad leaders unless we reduce the number of bad followers” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 21) is supported by other writers in the field of leadership as well. In his book, *The Powers to Lead*, Joseph Nye supports Kellerman’s stance, “...bad followers help produce bad leaders...” (Nye, 2008). The arguments presented by Kellerman flow well and are thought provoking and well taken by the causal and learned reader. Her presented reasons for why followers follow bad leaders: individual needs and group needs are logical and easily identified with (Kellerman, 2004).

Next Kellerman presents her categories of bad leadership: ineffective and unethical (Kellerman, 2004, p. 32). She simply defines ineffective leadership as

leadership that fails to produce change and unethical leadership as leadership that fails to distinguish between right and wrong (Kellerman, 2004). Both definitions are straightforward and well argued. This simple and straightforward approach enables Kellerman to put her types of bad leaders into each of the categories in easy translation for the reader. The reader is presented and easy to understand well developed definition of each without overwriting or over proposing the ideas. In his book, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, Jean Lipman-Blumen provides a bulleted list of 15 characteristics for what he calls a “toxic” leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 20). If he had focused on simply stating the matter as Kellerman did here, the reading of his text would have been much more logical as was Kellerman’s in these pages of the book. After these categories, Kellerman types each bad leadership into seven groups: incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil. The first three are ineffective and the rest are unethical (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman admits that typing leadership opens the door for argument and debate and openly admits to the wideness of the range, subjectivity, and differing views her typologies (Kellerman, 2004, pp. 38-39). Again, her arguments are simple and straight forward and easily understood, especially when presented with them again in later reading of the book as her highlighted leaders are grouped.

For the next 177 pages, Kellerman examines her highlighted leaders (Samaranch, Meeker, Barry, Dunlap, Aramony, Clinton, and Karadzic) under the heading of the group she has aligned them in. For instance, Clinton is grouped or typed as an *insular* leader (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman’s typing of Clinton as insular is worth critical assessment. Kellerman defines the insular leader as one who minimizes or disregards the health and welfare of those outside their group (Kellerman, 2004). In regards to Clinton, she

considers, insular, his treatment of the genocide committed by the Hutus against the Tutsis in Rwanda. Kellerman argues that Clinton put the needs of the Americans, his followers, ahead of the Tutsi people by failing to stop the genocide. While Kellerman's argument is judicial and well executed, her typing of Clinton as insular is debatable. Kellerman holds Clinton accountable for America's lack of action and while accountability belongs to the leader, it can be argued that her typing of him as insular when he very well may have been reduced powerless by the checks and balances of the American democratic system can be interpreted as unfair because they appear to be unfounded by her writings (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman's focus on Clinton as insular undermines the true insular facet in the situation, the American sentiment towards conflict at the time and the skittish and hesitant congress and senate unwilling to support another conflict. Nye counters Kellerman's typing of Clinton as insular as being too rigidly applied and, left unexpanded, unfair, "We may admire leaders who make efforts to increase their followers' concern for the consequences of their actions on the out-group, but it does little good to hold them to an impossible standard whose pursuit could undercut their capacity to remain leaders" (Nye, 2008, p. 134). The point is that convincing the reader that Clinton was insular by holding him up against the Rwandan genocide is too broad a stroke for many readers. She fails to convince the reader that Clinton was the "leader" in this facet. Nye points out in his book that The United Nations, and most specifically the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had strong accountability along with the many other nations of the UN for their failure to act (Nye, 2008). Kellerman could have chosen more acts of insularity or maybe included Clinton

as part of a larger group of insular leaders but this particular chapter may reduce her credibility when typing leaders for many readers.

PERSONAL REACTION

I am a student of the leadership industry that Kellerman refers to as her audience. In my 24 years in the Air Force has groomed me to lead and I have been taught and asked to assimilate certain teachings on leadership, those teachings the Air Force feels best align with their institutional values. Until I read Kellerman's I never truly considered the semantics of the label "leader" but I did consider that it was only to be given to someone who truly deserved it. As she points out, I was biased to the positive aspects of the term leader and would never have considered someone like Hitler or Stalin eligible or worthy of the title leader. After Kellerman's book, I have at least conceded that they may be eligible but I am still glued to the perception that they are not worthy. I hold the term in reserve, much like the term hero. I do not use it lightly and lionize those people whom I consider worthy of the title. As you can imagine, it was with great skepticism with which I read Kellerman's book, especially her opening chapters and as one can read in the critical assessment, I feel as though she left me wanting in her attempt to convince me that a tyrant like Hitler deserved to be called a leader as well as someone like Gandhi or Martin Luther King. However, Kellerman did succeed in intriguing me and although I do remain somewhat, note the use of the word somewhat, it is purposeful, unconvinced about the literal use of the label, I am convinced that we should learn from and examine the leadership and followership of tyrants, despots, and unethical/ineffective leaders past and present. Kellerman compares the leadership industry's focus on good leadership to that of a medical school focusing on only health and no disease (Kellerman, 2004) and I

concur, it is dangerous and misleading to do so. She opened my eyes to the fact that these “leaders” were leading and their followers were following. Having been stationed in Germany for 5 years of my career, I have often pondered how the German people ever fell in line with someone like Hitler. Kellerman’s perspective helped me understand the needs of the group (Kellerman, 2004) and it sparked memories in me of my dearest German friend, a man who was but a 10 year old child in WW II. He told me that he felt Hitler was a great “leader”, it is worth noting, I speak fluent German and “führer” means leader or guide, but my friend’s use of the term was more of a label in the way that Kellerman would use it. In other words, he felt that Hitler did good things for Germany in many respects but was ultimately exposed as “insane” and unworthy of following. He laments that by the time they all figured it out, it was too late. So, Kellerman raises some valid points worthy of further discussion and debate. She has sparked my interest in the topic and caused me to read further writings of a similar nature such as Lawrence’s *Driven to Lead* and Lippen-Blumen’s *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*.

Leadership industry normally teaches leadership as an art, leaders are born, or a science, leaders can be made or taught. Kellerman seems to side with the thought of leadership as an art. On page four of the text she lists several popular books on leadership from the past 20 years and states, “Each of these books assumes that people can learn to be leaders and that to be a leader is to be a person of competence and character” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 4). As I mentioned before, I am a student of leadership for the past 20 years and I concede that this is exactly what I have been taught and what I believe. Although Kellerman does not continue along the lines of countering the idea that a leader must be born to leading she does frame the science of leadership as being

optimistic and somewhat naive. In his writings on “Practical Leadership“, General Thomas Richards, at the time Deputy Commander of the US European Command, wrote, “Leadership is a vital part of today’s Air Force; therefore, we cannot depend on born leaders—we must build them through formal training and progressive levels of responsibility” (Richards, 2001). I am a product of that line of thinking and I would counter Kellerman’s thoughts on the subject. She seems to focus on the industry’s efforts as laterally ineffective and seemingly concludes that if bad leadership is ignored then we are not truly teaching people to be leaders. Again referring to leadership industry’s current trends, she states, “In this book I argue that there’s something odd about the idea that somehow leadership can be distinguished from coercion, as if leadership and power were unrelated” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 4). I consider this argument naïve to the actual teachings that she calls “positively biased” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 4). Again and again I was taught that coercion is a tool of leadership and that power came in many forms. To sum all the writings and current teachings on leadership into that one phrase from Kellerman reduced her argument’s credence for me but I still retain my intrigue for her proposals all the same.

Kellerman’s book left me thinking about my future as a leader, my pursuit of a degree in leadership, and my personal thoughts and beliefs on the subject. To that end, this was a powerful read for me. Her chapter on Al Dunlap, the “callous” former CEO of Sunbeam, definitely sparked my interest in learning from the mistakes and “crimes” of people elevated to these types of positions. Kellerman’s right, I was focusing on “good” leaders (Kellerman, 2004). Now I want to learn from and read about people like Dunlap and Samaranch. To that end, Kellerman has at least opened my eyes to another way of

thinking about leadership and I love that part of the reading. I will read this book again and I will continue to be intrigued about the term, “bad leadership” and all that it entails.

References

- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row Publishers: New York.
- Kellerman, B. (2004). *Bad leadership: what it is, how it happens, why it matters*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Keohane, N. O. (2010). *Thinking About Leadership*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lawrence, P. R. (2010). *Driven to Lead: Good, Bad, and Misguided Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipman-Blumen, J. (2005). *The allure of toxic leaders: why we follow destructive bosses and corrupt politicians--and how we can survive them*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. S. (2008). *The Powers to Lead*. Oxford University press, Inc.: New York.
- Richards, T. C. (2001). Practical leadership. *Concepts for Air Force Leadership*, 223-225.