



This is why we can't have nice things: We are stuck with leaders... or managers. Commentary on Kniffin, Detert, & Leroy (2020)

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Abstract:	Building on Kniffin, Detert, & Leroy's (2020) observations on the popularity and impact of the distinction between leaders and managers, this commentary examines the history and enduring appeal of a dichotomy that might well do more harm than good.

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3 **This is why we cannot have nice things: We are stuck with leaders... or managers.**

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5 **Commentary on Kniffin, Detert, & Leroy (2020)**

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15 Once upon a time, business schools focused on management and managers. Faculty
16 researched the intricacies of administration and trained students to manage skillfully and
17 dispassionately using the latest evidence at hand. If that paradise ever existed, it is now lost.
18 We can blame the seductive lure of leadership for it, or simply our inability to resist its appeal.
19 That is the unspoken premise in Kniffin, Detert, and Leroy (in press)'s new study, an empirical
20 *tour de force* into the habit of viewing managers as different from leaders and soberly praising
21 the former while giving our hearts—and money—to the latter. Academics have indulged in this
22 habit for decades. In scholarly publications, we dissect management with intellectual restraint.
23 After all, we are members of an Academy that is named after it. But put us in a classroom, or
24 give us a slot in a business magazine, and most of us become passionate purveyors of leadership.

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One only needs to look at the evolution of business schools' mission statements over
the past few decades, Kniffin et al. suggest, to witness the turn from management to leadership.
The fork in the road, it seems, appeared when Abraham Zaleznik (1977) published a seminal
piece in the *Harvard Business Review* arguing that management and leadership were different
activities. While using catchier labels, the piece echoed sociologist Max Weber's (1958) classic
distinction between different types 'legitimate rule,' two of which were the legal-rational kind,
based on mastery of bureaucratic systems and their rules, and the charismatic one, based on
personal appeal. Weber deemed the former more advanced, stabler, and more civilized.
Zaleznik warned that companies did too and favored managers over leaders at their peril.
Managers ensured fair and smooth operations. But leaders ignited commitment and change.

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3 Reading between the lines, Zaleznik, a psychoanalyst and management professor, might
4 have been writing about his own organization as much as any other. At the time, the Harvard
5 Business School, on whose faculty he served, was engaged in the project of professionalizing
6 management through an emphasis on positivist research and a commitment to train general
7 managers for large corporations (Khurana, 2007). In the process, the radical interpretivism of
8 psychoanalysis and its longstanding interest in leaders' emotional appeal were being
9 marginalized (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Zaleznik's conceptualization and warning, then,
10 might well have been a defensive strike against the threat of a neo-Taylorist dehumanization of
11 organization studies and management practice (Petriglieri, 2020).
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24 Zaleznik's typology worked just the way defenses do. It stuck and it created as many
25 problems as it solved. Through multiple studies, Kniffin et al support this contention. Forty
26 years after Zaleznik's article and many more in that vein, people believe leadership and
27 management to involve distinct activities and favor the former, especially when time is short
28 and stakes are high. Unless we stop and think, they show, we don't care for contingencies. We
29 just want salvation. These findings present a challenge to those who critique management
30 thinkers for making little difference in the world (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). We actually do, they
31 suggest, backing the contention that management theories are self-fulfilling (Ghoshal, 2005).
32 The labels we use for people in power, and the ways we portray them, become templates that
33 inform the identity work of those who aspire to emulate them (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015).
34 (Theories are like leaders that way, their influence rests on our wishes more than on their truth).
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49 Showing that we do make a difference, Kniffin et al. raise a thorny question. What kind
50 of difference do we make when we reinforce the distinction between leaders and managers?
51 The question should concern anyone involved in or with the leadership industrial complex. That
52 is, people like me, Kniffin, Detert, Leroy, and most likely you if you are reading this piece. The
53 leadership industrial complex is sprawling and diversified. It spans private and public sectors.
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3 It encompasses scholarship, opinion writing, educational activities, selection, consulting and
4 coaching practices all devoted to the construction of leadership and the development of leaders.
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6 Like its military counterpart, this industry profits from anxiety that it helps sustain. Namely,
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8 the anxiety that a world, an organization, and a career without “leadership” are doomed.
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12 I witness that anxiety on a daily basis in my classrooms and in the corporations I visit.
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14 I have also documented it in my research. Jennifer Petriglieri, Jack Wood, and I found that
15 managers regard the pursuit of leadership as both insurance and preparation for mobile careers
16 in a world of work that changes fast and offers no guarantees (Petriglieri, Wood, and Petriglieri,
17 2018). Treating leadership that way, as an antidote against the uncertainty of the workplace and
18 a booster for one’s career prospects, however, requires conceptualizing it as an activity and an
19 identity rather than as a place in an institution (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Only then we might
20 own it and take it with us. To be leaders, then, is to be seen and followed for what we say and
21 do, for what we mean to people, not because of our place and resources in a system on which
22 our influence depends (Ashford and Sitkin, 2019). To be leaders, in short, is not to be managers.
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24 Kniffin et al’s findings appear to reflect a widespread consternation—to be a manager is to be
25 useful, but dispensable. It is no protection against anxiety in the workplace. In many such
26 places, in fact, wanting to be a manager is a questionable aspiration if it is one at all. It is like
27 wanting to be a dinosaur in an age where leaders have the disruptive impact of meteorites.
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31 That is why we cannot have nice things, argue the scholars who have criticized the focus
32 on leadership in business and business schools (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer, 2015). Preach
33 passion above competence, influence above stewardship, and soon you will find much passion
34 for influence and little competent stewardship at the top of corporations and countries. The line
35 between conceptualizing leadership as stylish influence and normalizing leaders’ narcissism is
36 much finer than many of us would like it to be (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). Kniffin et al.
37 seem to agree, lamenting that the reflexive choice of leaders bypasses the reflective concern for
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3 what might work best in one's context and contingency that scholars hold dear. And yet they
4 warn that "whether we, as scholars, like the distinctions made decades ago by Zaleznik, Kotter,
5 and others, they are now deeply embedded in the lay theories that drive many decisions" (p. 5).
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8 Not only people in their studies perceived leaders and managers to do different things, they also
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10 saw what leaders do as more valuable, harder to learn, and more flattering. Even if you are not
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12 called a leader, they found, you must act like one if you want people to hire you or fund your
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14 venture (see also Ibarra, 2015). Put another way, our financial investment in leaders is a
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16 byproduct of our psychological investment in leadership. We are stuck with leaders. But why?
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21 Kniffin et al claim to be studying the "contemporary obsession" (p. 6) with leadership
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23 and documenting the problematic influence of popular prototypes—or maybe more precisely,
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25 stereotypes—of management and leadership. But their findings, I suspect, unearth a frailty of
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27 our inner worlds that dates well past the founding of the *Harvard Business Review*. I believe
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29 the term obsession to be an accurate description of our relationship with leaders, in that our
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31 preoccupation with them often stands for and obscures a broader range of worries. But how
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33 contemporary is that obsession? One only needs to look at pyramids, imperial palaces, and
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35 equestrian monuments to realize that even the most laudatory business case study is only a faint
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37 homage in comparison. We have been obsessed with leaders forever. What Kniffin et al. hint
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39 to, however, is that business was not, until fairly recently, the place where we went looking for
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41 them. Business and its bureaucracies were for managers. Leadership was for generals, prophets,
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43 royalty, artists, presidents, rebels, and the like. No longer. Now it is corporate titans and startup
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45 founders that we hail as heroes and villains around the global fire. (Meanwhile, to even things
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47 out, managerialism has conquered vast swathes of the public sector). While I wrote this piece,
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49 for example, the news was filled with tales of a disgraced celebrity CEO who had got his former
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51 company to pay for his birthday party... in the French Royal Palace of Versailles (Lewis, 2019).
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3 To see the turn to leadership in business as a consequence of the increased power and
4 social centrality of corporations neither diminishes the import of Kniffin et al.'s findings, nor
5 does it absolve the leadership industrial complex of responsibility. If anything, it amplifies both.
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7 One of the most fascinating findings in Kniffin et al.'s studies is that our attraction to leaders is
8 stronger when we choose quickly, without deliberation. To explain it, the authors offer a
9 comparison to our food choices. It is easiest to replace the earthy substance of management, it
10 seems, with the empty calories of leadership when we are hungry and in a rush. To say that
11 there is nothing new about hunger, and about the effect of time pressure on our choices, is
12 hardly to justify the way the contemporary fast food industry exploits their combination and
13 shapes our taste and habits in the process. Kniffin et al. move from metaphor to mechanism
14 when they suggest that when picking managers or leaders, we are really answering the question,
15 "What can you do for me?" (p. 44) Framing the question this way reveals what lies beneath
16 elegant cognitive frames and the social construction that "is at the core of whether a particular
17 behavior is conceptualized as leading" (DeRue, 2011: 130). Wishes, that is. Wishes for power.
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21 In their experimental design, Kniffin et al. put participants in a powerful position,
22 psychologically speaking. How else can we describe being in charge of choosing who can turn
23 around a flailing corporation, or whose company deserves more of our funding? In the scenarios
24 that the experiments evoked, participants had choices and money to invest. And their
25 investments, in turn, would influence if not control the future. What is not to like? A century
26 ago, Freud (1921) observed that we pick leaders in order to put ourselves in that very position,
27 one in which our investment (in leaders) will yield a more powerful present and a more
28 prosperous future, no matter how realistic those prospects are. In fact, Freud argued that we do
29 it all the more the less realistic those prospects are. Leaders, seen that way, "are neither born
30 nor made ... They are fabricated" (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020: 431). Freud's theory fits
31 recent findings in social psychology (Hogg, 2007). The more distressed and powerless we feel,
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3 the more fanatical are the leaders we invest in. To choose sensible leaders, we should never
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5 pick leaders in a crisis or in a rush. Oh, well.... maybe that is why we cannot have nice things.
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8 If leaders are fabricated out of wishes to keep reality at bay, and to build a future that
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10 looks better than the present, what about managers? Are we really more rational just for picking
11
12 them? Not necessarily, Kniffin et al.'s findings imply. The activities we attribute to leaders *and*
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14 managers might both be answers to the question "what can you do for me?" Seen that way, we
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16 might consider the distinction between managers and leaders as a duality that encompasses the
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18 fulfilment of complementary yet conflicting human wishes. (What makes us humans is that we
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20 are complicated, and we want more than one thing at once). We want evidence and excitement,
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22 data and dreams. We want to be equipped to predict the future, and we want to be allowed to
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24 imagine it. We want to be reassured and to be freed up. Manager might be the label we use for
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26 those who help us do the former. Leader is what we call those who help us do the latter. We
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28 invest in each for different reasons—or wishes. And either loses value without the other. That
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30 might explain why Kniffin et al. finds the two categories to be related, albeit distinct.
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35 If my interpretation of their studies' findings is plausible, then the question becomes,
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37 how does this pair of constructs, and wishes, relate? Or more accurately, how do we put them
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39 in relation in our scholarly writings and organizational lives? When are we able to integrate
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41 them? What helps them get along? And why do we keep them apart and set them up to fight?
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43 Future research should expand Kniffin et al.'s studies and examine whether and when people
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45 see leadership and management as mutually exclusive. Would research participants, for
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47 example, have been more or less likely to pick a third person portrayed with a mix of manager
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49 and leader virtues over the two clearer prototypes? Do people believe that having the identity
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51 of a manager disqualifies one from being seen as a leader? Does proving to be a leader seem to
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53 assure that one will never again be (just) a manager? In short, are leaders and managers just
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55 estranged, in the popular imagination, or have they become antagonists?
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3 The current cult of disruption suggests the latter, and so does a theoretical perspective
4 that Krantz and Gilmore (1990) offered three decades ago. The distinction between leadership
5 and management, they argued, is a manifestation of splitting, a defence mechanism through
6 which people partition a complex phenomenon into clearer parts and then glorify one part and
7 denigrate the other (Klein, 1959). Splitting restores clarity and comfort at the expense of our
8 abilities to think critically and entertain contradictions within and around us. In the battle
9 between the advocates of management and those of leadership, Krantz and Gilmore (1990)
10 suggested, both sides are depraved and deprived, so to speak. Twisting the meaning of
11 management to exclude and oppose leadership, and vice versa, severs functions that are vital to
12 the maintenance and advancement of any enterprise. Splitting leadership from management and
13 arguing for the superior value of one, in other words, is like asking whether the brain or the
14 heart is most important. Which one would you rather give up? In the same way, stripping
15 management of morality and leadership of rationality dehumanizes and disempowers us all.
16 Seen this way, the source of our troubles is the splitting of management and leadership more
17 than our obsession with the latter. That, perhaps, is why we cannot have nice things.

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19 The one question left, then, is who benefits from such split? Kniffin et al. suggest an
20 answer to that question too. It is those who have power to pick leaders and those who have time
21 to think things through and argue that we need managers instead. That portrait resembles many
22 of us entrenched in the practice or scholarly arms of the leadership industrial complex. In
23 making the case for leaders, Zaleznik bequeathed us all a defensive way to feel right and good.
24 We can get what we wish for and we can look down on the others as fools. That might be why
25 we can't have nice things, really. What nice things, you ask? Neither a managerial paradise lost,
26 nor a leaderful utopia to come. But something much more humane, heartier, and harder to
27 build. Institutions where we can get along or argue well, passion is held, reasons are heard, and
28 managing and leading abound instead of their caricatures—the managers and leaders.

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