

## Barbara Kellerman: There's a better way to train leaders

Robert J. Allio

**B**arbara Kellerman, the James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Leadership at the Kennedy School of Harvard University, has steadfastly attempted through her writing to lift the veil of misinformation that clouds our understanding of the leadership phenomenon. In her book *Bad Leadership* in 2004 she warned of the pervasiveness of harmful leaders and offers some remedial strategies.[1] In *Followership* in 2008, she called attention to the critical role of the follower in the leadership system.[2] In *The End of Leadership* in 2012 she indicted the deficiencies of the leadership industry.[3] In her new book, *Professionalizing Leadership*, she argues that we can do better and offers a bold prescription for training effective leaders.[4] Some of her provocative assessments of the state and practice of leadership training:



Barbara Kellerman latest book is *Professionalizing Leadership*

- Leadership training is a business, a money-making operation that depends nearly entirely on its dubious claim to be able to teach how to lead wisely and well.
- Surveys indicate that about half of all leaders and managers are still judged a disappointment.
- Despite signs that dissatisfaction with training and developing leaders continues to increase, the leadership industry has been growing.
- There is precious little evidence that the leadership industry has in any meaningful, measurable way benefited society.
- Bad leadership puts on vivid display the unbreakable link between leaders and followers – a link that the leadership industry willfully ignores precisely because there's no money in it.
- Bad leaders haunt leadership theory and leadership practice.
- To be effective, the leadership development process must adopt and achieve three goals: educate leaders, train leaders and develop leaders.
- If leadership training is professionalized it can be taught – to a point.

In this interview, she is challenged to explain the basis for her radical new approach to resolving dysfunctional leadership training.

Her interviewer is Robert J. Allio, a member of the team that in the 1970s founded *Planning Review*, the publication that became *Strategy & Leadership*. Now an S&L contributing editor, he is the author of some 45 articles on leadership. A principal of Allio Associates, a strategy consultancy located in Providence, RI ([rallio@mac.com](mailto:rallio@mac.com)), and an Adjunct Professor at Brown University, his lengthy list of books ranges from *Corporate Planning: Techniques and Applications* (1979) to *The Seven Faces of Leadership* (2002).

**Strategy & Leadership:** You've been a steadfast critic of an industry – businesses, universities, consultants, book sellers – that professes to teach leadership and train good leaders. One of your prescriptions for the industry's failure to deliver on its promises is that we elevate leadership to the status of a profession. How will this solve the problem?

**Barbara Kellerman:** In my book, *Professionalizing Leadership*, I ask this question: Why is it that we educate and train our doctors and lawyers with great care and competence, but not our leaders? For that matter, why is it that we take seriously the training and credentialing of our hair dressers and truck drivers, but not our leaders? Why, in short, do we treat medicine and law like professions, and hair dressing and truck driving like vocations, but leadership like an occupation? Why do we treat leadership so woefully casually and carelessly?

In the book, I describe learning leading as a lame undertaking. "Leadership has no body of knowledge, core curriculum, or skill set considered essential. Leadership has no widely agreed on metric, no clear criteria for qualification. Leadership has no license or credential or accreditation or certification considered by consensus to be legitimate. Leadership has no professional body or association to oversee the conduct of its members – or to guarantee minimum standards. Leadership receives no attention from federal, state or local officials who tend otherwise to regulate the different professions and vocations. Finally, unlike a profession, leadership does not necessarily imply service, nor does it have a code of ethics to ennoble or even enhance the enterprise."

Philosophers have declared for centuries that learning to lead should be considered more important, more urgent, than learning to do anything else. Confucius made clear that preparing to lead was an art as well as a science, and that leaders should be adapting, adopting, and absorbing lifelong. Plato thought that leaders had to learn everything from mathematics to music to the military arts, and that they ought to spend their childhood, their adolescence and their young adulthood absorbing new information and ideas and perfecting their various skills. Machiavelli acknowledges in *The Prince* that learning to lead is not swift or easy. Instead, leadership is a subject to be studied carefully and a practice to be exercised judiciously.

In the U.S. there is a single institution that, in my view, teaches how to lead with care and competence, with insight and intelligence, with duty and diligence – the American military. It recognizes that to be effective it must educate leaders, train leaders and develop leaders.

These three verbs – educate, train and develop – are not one and the same. Though in the field of leadership they are used virtually interchangeably, they are not. They are



different, which is precisely why each should be taken seriously and treated as being separate and distinct.

Of course, most groups and organizations do not have the resources – human, fiscal or temporal – of the American military. So, they cannot replicate what the military does. But, they do have the capacity to provide at least some modest leadership education, some minimal leadership training and some intermittent opportunities for lifelong leadership development. If they do not, or if they do not choose to make this sort of investment, they should get out of the business of purportedly teaching people how to lead.

### Bad leadership

**S&L:** We continue to see pervasive evidence of inept or corrupt leadership, often enabled by the failure of followers to effectively react and respond. And there's much evidence that leaders succumb to corrupt practice as they accumulate power. We have many case histories—Enron, Wells Fargo, Volkswagen, to name a few. Doesn't power produce an inevitable leadership disability? Indeed, Lord Acton reminds us that "Great men are almost always bad men." Why do we see such a paucity of research on this phenomenon?

**Kellerman:** There was a time when I was baffled, even distressed, that the leadership industry, even leadership as an area of intellectual inquiry, was so willfully ignorant of bad leadership. Years ago, I wrote a short paper, titled "Hitler's Ghost: A Manifesto."<sup>[5]</sup> In it I argued that even though we paid them little attention, bad leaders nevertheless haunted leadership theory and leadership practice. In consequence, it was our professional obligation as leadership experts to correct for the strong bias toward the positive and away from the negative, to study good leaders and not bad ones.

Silly me. My manifesto made no impression at all. My subsequent book on the subject, *Bad Leadership*, similarly had little practical impact. In other words, for reasons I once could not fathom, the interest among leadership experts in bad leadership remains meager.

Well, now I know why. It is because leadership is a business, a money-making operation that depends nearly entirely on its claim to be able to teach how to lead wisely and well. Leadership experts do not, in other words, teach, simply, how to lead. They teach, ostensibly, how to be a good leader – not a bad one. Ergo, there is no need to study bad leadership, to come to understand it, or even, it turns out, to try to stop or at least restrain it.

There's another reason as well. We ignore bad leadership because it cannot be understood as separate and distinct from bad followership. We cannot begin to understand how bad leaders get away with what they get away with without beginning to understand how followers enable them, whether actively, with deliberate forethought, or passively, by being bystanders. Put directly, bad leadership puts on vivid display the unbreakable link between leaders and followers – a link that the leadership industry willfully ignores precisely because there's no money in it. There's big money in teaching people how to lead, but not in teaching people how to follow. Still, it's up to us, credible leadership researchers, to think of leadership as a system, one in which, inevitably, leaders and followers interact.

**“Why is it that we educate and train our doctors and lawyers with great care and competence, but not our leaders?”**

**“The American military . . . recognizes that to be effective it must educate leaders, train leaders and develop leaders.”**

The leadership system is simple, really. It has only three parts – but they are each of equal importance “leaders,” “followers,” “contexts.” In fact, it was while I was writing *Bad Leadership* that I came to understand that leadership was not all about a single individual; it was about the followers and context as well. To take a glaring example, you cannot understand what happened in Nazi Germany by understanding only the tyrant at the top – Adolf Hitler. You must also address the actions and attitudes of his followers, the German people – ranging from those who were Hitler’s acolytes, to those who were “ordinary men,” to those who dared to resist the Nazi juggernaut. The resisters, I should note, were followers who flat out refused to follow. Similarly, you must understand the context – German history and culture, German politics and the German economy, which, during the 1920s and early 1930s, had careened from skyrocketing inflation to crippling depression. Only by looking at the whole picture can we begin to come to grips with what happened in Nazi Germany, and how and maybe even why.

Bad leadership is as endemic to the human condition as is good leadership. It’s a crying shame that the leadership industry continues, largely, willfully to ignore it.

### Followership

**S&L:** Given that you see followers and the leaders are part of a system, should more attention be given to the important role of the followers in the leadership system?

**Kellerman:** When I wrote *Followership* in 2008 the word still elicited a censorious spellcheck prompt; either I had misspelled the word, or it did not even exist. But though it’s now quite commonly used, the word, “followership” remains still a stepchild in the leadership industry, and in most organizations, even in institutions of higher education that ought to know better. Moreover, the idea that learning how to follow wisely and well might be of consequence, in addition to learning how to lead wisely and well, tends to strike even the most ardent leadership advocates as wrongheaded or even ridiculous.

The well-known social psychologist Edwin Hollander pointed out two generations ago in his 1978 book, *Leadership Dynamics*, that “Leadership is a process of influence which involves an ongoing transaction between a leader and followers. The key to effective leadership is this relationship. Though most attention is given to the leader, leadership depends upon more than a single person to achieve group goals. Therefore, the followers as well as the leader are vital to understanding leadership as a process.”

Most leadership researchers who focus on followers divide them into groups, or types. In *Followership*, for example, I developed my own typology based on a single metric that aligns followers along a single continuum: level of engagement. I divided followers into five types – Isolates, Bystanders, Participants, Activists, and Diehards – depending on where they fell along a continuum that ranged from doing absolutely nothing, to being passionately committed and deeply engaged.

I urge anyone with an interest in leadership not to be put off by the very word “follower.” Followers are not sheep. Followers are not weak or passive. Of course, if you prefer, use another word, such as “stakeholder.” All I am arguing is that those other than the leader can, and sometimes do, participate equally in decision-making. Those other than the leader can, and sometimes do speak truth to power. Those other than the leader can and sometimes do, upend the status quo.

## The leadership training industry

**S&L:** You have excoriated most leadership programs for their failure to produce any discernable improvement in leadership, either at the corporate or political level. Yet leadership training is one of the growth businesses of our times. This is most baffling—we invest more but realize less return. How do you account for this paradox? Are we naïve or ignorant?

**Kellerman:** Beginning with my 2012 book, *The End of Leadership*, I have been critical of what I call the leadership industry. The “leadership industry” is my catchall term for the “now countless leadership centers, institutes, programs, courses, seminars, workshops, experiences, trainers, books, blogs, articles, website, webinars, videos, conferences, consultants, and coaches claiming to teach people – usually for money – how to lead.”

Despite the remarkable proliferation of such businesses – driven by individuals and institutions that readily pay money, sometimes big money, to be taught how to lead – there is precious little evidence that the leadership industry has in any meaningful, measurable way benefited society. Moreover, astonishingly, given its continuing success, the level of dissatisfaction with the industry is high. Most surveys confirm that about half of all leaders and managers are still judged a disappointment. And, critical articles, such as one in a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, have exposed “Why Leadership Development Isn’t Developing Leaders.”<sup>[6]</sup> Despite such signs that dissatisfaction with the leadership industry has been growing, our investment in the business of educating, training, and developing leaders continues to increase.

So why do we continue to plow money into a business that has rather a poor record of evidently paying off? Here three reasons.

- The myth of the charismatic leader persists. Despite the obvious changes in leadership and followership – in both the private and public sectors there is ample evidence of the decreasing power of leaders and the increasing power of followers – we continue to believe that single individuals of sterling accomplishment hold the keys to the kingdom.
- Though the leadership industry is less than a half century old, it is already deeply entrenched in the public and nonprofit sectors as well as in the private one. Even higher education has invested heavily in the idea that it can teach people how to lead – quickly and easily.
- Individuals – aspiring leaders everywhere, from young students to seasoned executives – continue to turn to leadership programs to help them get ahead. Many leaders and managers believe that learning to lead is important or even essential to their personal, professional and financial success.

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**“We ignore bad leadership because it cannot be understood as separate and distinct from bad followership.”**

## Developing good leaders

**S&L:** Aren't leadership theories underdetermined by our lack of data to validate them?

**Kellerman:** There are too many variables to develop a leadership pedagogy that applies in across the board. To be sure, as I write in *Professionalizing Leadership*, there are some constants, some universal truths that transcend time and place. But learning to lead typically profits from being situation specific.

**S&L:** Arguably, teaching about leadership is easy, but learning how to lead is not. But why can't I become a good leader by following Aristotle's exhortation to treat leadership as a craft that can be mastered by continual practice?

**Kellerman:** Leadership can be taught – to a point. For that matter, so can cooking and swimming and piano playing – to a point. Inevitably, though, innate talent matters. I, for instance, could take a piano lesson every day of my life – lessons that might over time make me a good pianist, but would never make me a great pianist. Learning to lead can matter. It can help us to become better leaders than we would be without any instruction. But innate talent is every bit as relevant to leadership as it is to musicianship.

You want to grow good leaders in your organization or institution? Leaders who are as ethical as effective? If the answer to either of these questions is “Yes,” let me repeat my mantra: Think leadership education. Think leadership training. Think leadership development. Each of these can be adapted to your organization's special situation. But each of these constitutes a critical part of the programmatic whole.

## Notes

1. Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 2004.
2. Barbara Kellerman, *Followership*, Harvard Business Press, 2008.
3. Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership*, Harper Collins, 2012.
4. Barbara Kellerman, *Professionalizing Leadership*, Oxford University Press, 2018.
5. “Hitler's Ghost: A Manifesto” in Barbara Kellerman and Lorraine Matusak (Eds), *Cutting Edge Leadership*, 2000. Burns Academy of Leadership (College Park: Center for the Advanced Study of Leadership), pp. 65-68.
6. Deborah Rowland, “Why Leadership Development Isn't Developing Leaders,” October 14, 2016, *Harvard Business Review*.

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