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The executive's trinity: management, leadership — and command

The distinction between 'managers' and 'leaders' has generated much debate in the business world. Stephen Bungay defines the difference between the two terms, and, drawing on lessons from the military, proposes a third concept — command — which is essential for providing the direction of an organisation's activities.

Managers versus leaders

In 1977, a Harvard Business School professor, Abraham Zaleznik, published an article in HBR entitled *Managers and leaders: Are they different?* His answer was 'yes' — in fact he argued not only that management and leadership are different roles but that managers and leaders are different types of people. Subsequently, articles and books multiplied, leadership courses appeared in every business school in the world, and today's best-selling business books are far more likely to have 'leadership' than 'management' in the title.

Zaleznik's 'manager' is an administrator. Managers 'emphasise rationality and control', adopt 'impersonal if not passive attitudes towards goals', and get people to accept solutions to problems by 'balancing opposing views'. In 1992 Zaleznik added that whilst managers seek order and control, leaders 'tolerate chaos and lack of structure'. Leaders contrast with managers in every way. They 'work from high risk positions; indeed they are often temperamentally disposed to seek out risk and danger'; they are active towards goals, 'shaping ideas instead of responding to them'; they try to 'open issues to new options' by getting people excited by their ideas, and thus 'attract strong feelings of identity and difference or of love and hate'¹. The corollary is that business needs more leaders and fewer managers, particularly in an environment of rapid change.

Leadership in the military

In the military world, people began studying *leadership* a couple of thousand years ago — and interestingly, the military are less dismissive of *management*. Even more interestingly, they talk about something else we do not talk about in business at all. They have a third concept: *command*.

In military language, 'command and control' covers the various ways in which

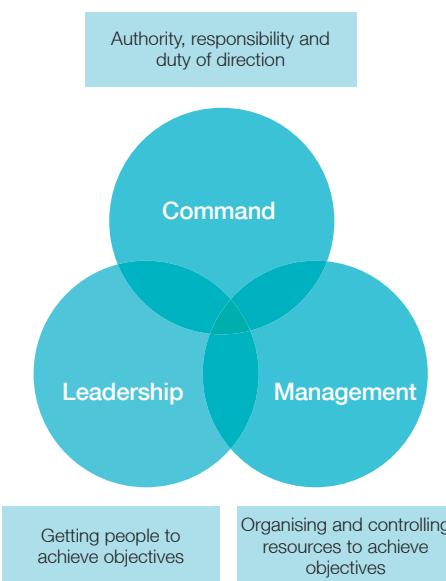


Fig 1 The trinity

direction is given and the effects of actions are monitored. But in the language of business, 'command and control' has become shorthand for 'authoritarian micro-management', which is just one — usually dysfunctional — way of exercising it. Giving the words 'command and control' this negative sense is a strange choice, because business is quite keen on 'control'. Equating 'command and control' with 'authoritarian micro-management' is a category error — it confuses 'fruit' with 'rotten apples'. Not using the word will not make the activity referred to as 'command' go away. NATO defines command as: 'The authority invested in an individual for the direction, co-ordination and control of military forces'². Co-ordination and control are classic roles of management. So perhaps the bit we don't feel so comfortable with is 'direction'.

Distinguish leadership from command

Command is something granted to someone by an external party. The external

party confers rights of authority and along with them go responsibilities, duties and accountability. Responsibilities may be delegated or shared, but the commander remains accountable for the results³. In the British Armed Forces, command is ultimately granted by the Sovereign: in the United States, by the President. In businesses it is granted by the owners of the business, who are most commonly the shareholders.

Command is as unavoidable in the business world as it is in the military one. Because it is a real requirement, somebody has got to do it, and because of its central importance in business we have to talk about it. So we do: we include it under 'leadership'. As a result, we cause confusion.

Business thinking suffers from offering the simple duality of management and leadership, and the leadership literature contains futile debates because of a failure to distinguish leadership from command. There is a trinity of command, leadership and management, and both officers and

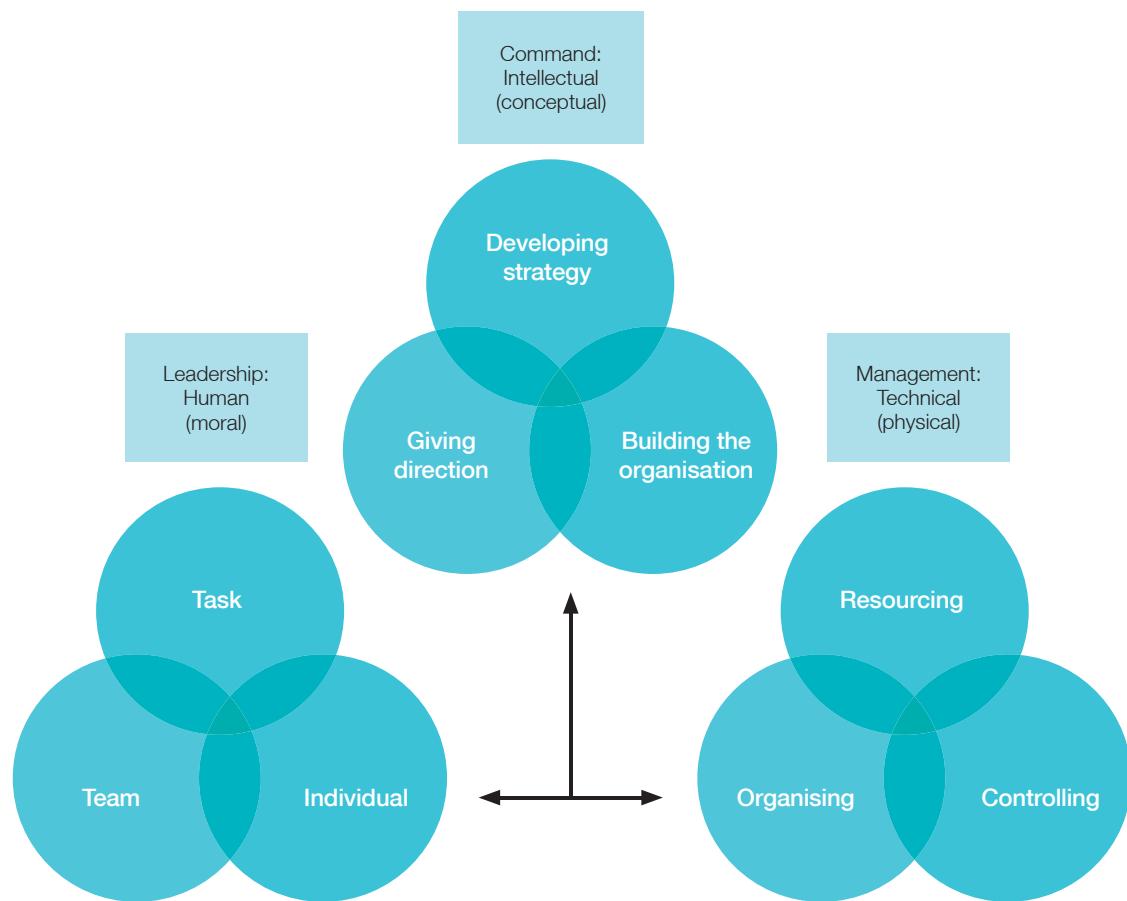


Fig 2 The elements of the trinity

executives have to practise all three, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The three types of activity overlap, which is why it is easy to confuse them. Indeed, at any point in time, a single individual might be doing all three. Accounts of their specific nature and their relationship differ, but I would suggest that they could be understood as shown in Figure 2.

Command

The duties and responsibilities of command involve setting direction. The skills required are primarily intellectual.

Commanders develop strategic direction considering the aims they have been given by their stakeholders, the environment they are in and the capabilities of their organisation. They also further build its capabilities to realise the strategy. Critically, they then have to actually give direction by communicating their intent in ways the organisation can act on.

Management

Management is about providing and controlling the means of following the direction. It is less conceptual than the work of command, and more a matter of

deploying assets: marshalling resources, organising and controlling them. Managing means understanding objectives, solving problems and creating processes so that others can be organised efficiently.

Leadership

Leading is an activity that is moral and emotional. The job of a leader is to motivate and inspire followers so that they are willing to go in the required direction and perform their own tasks better. Leaders have to balance their attention between defining and achieving the specific task, building and maintaining the team, and developing

the individuals within it. If they neglect the team, it may disintegrate; if they neglect the task, it may not get done; if they neglect the needs of individuals, they may become disaffected. Regardless of their personal traits, successful leaders get their balance of attention right⁴.

Essentials of the trinity

1. The first point about the trinity is that no single element is more important than the other. Few need convincing that leadership matters. Management is unfashionable in business, but it has lost none of its relevance. The military take it very seriously. A famous American general once said that success in war was about 'getting there fastest with the mostest'. That means logistics, and logistics is about management. Command sits at the top of the trinity pyramid because it is not properly recognised, because it is in practice where the most significant deficits are found and because if it is poorly done, excellence in the other two cannot compensate.
2. The second point is that the trinity describes types of work, not types of people. Every officer or executive who rises to a senior position will have to achieve some measure of competence in all three. At the beginning of their careers, as soon as they have one or two people working for them, they will have to start leading. As they get promoted they will end up running a department which will have to be not only led but managed. Finally, as they rise through the ranks of middle management, they will have to learn how to exercise command.
3. The third point is that although the trinity does not define different people, it does define different skills, and people's ability to master them varies. Some inspiring leaders are poor

managers, some brilliant commanders are ineffectual leaders, and some very efficient managers can neither command nor lead. Because all three sets of skills are equally important, there are two consequences. It means that although the circles overlap, we must be aware of what mode we are primarily operating in at any point in time; and it means that we must beware of how we select our top leaders: the commanders.

Leading and commanding

In leading, we cast doubts aside and encourage people by focusing on the positive. We persuade and cajole. Even if a strategy is not watertight, energetic leadership can make it work.

In commanding, we step back, appraise the facts and do our utmost to grasp reality. We generate ideas about possible direction and then probe them for weaknesses. We strive to sort out the essentials and hone our messages until they are clear and simple.

If we continue in command mode when we are called upon to lead, we are liable to come across as cold and calculating. If we approach the work of command in the belief that it is about leadership, we are liable to ignore warning signs, produce biased appraisals of what is possible and come up with a gung-ho strategy that will wreck the organisation.

Senior people need both leadership and command skills and must be self-aware enough to provide the organisation with what it needs at any point in time. When developing strategy, they think like commanders; when they move to execution, they act like leaders. The danger is charismatic leaders who neither understand nor have the intellect to carry out all the tasks of command and so stay in one mode. They can wreak havoc.

Different realms of activity

Great commanders who are not great leaders are not so much of a problem: in fact in the right role, which is often at the very top, they can be outstandingly effective. Because of their integrity, dedication to the task, and professional competence, they inspire confidence and people will follow them. The humble but strong-willed 'Level 5 Leader' described by Jim Collins is made of this stuff⁶. Collins identifies 11 such characters, whereas Tom Peters expresses scepticism by listing other leaders who were not like this but nevertheless did have a great impact⁶. Collins creates the confusion by writing as if command were simply the highest level of leadership, with leadership and command in a continuum, rather than different realms of activity. Both Collins and Peters lump leadership and command together, prompting a sterile argument.

Occasionally some people emerge who are outstanding at leadership, command and management, but they are rare, and therefore often become celebrated, as Welch is in our day and Nelson was in his. In practice, most companies seeking to fill their top jobs have to choose from among people with varying strengths in the different realms; and at the very top, making the trade-off in favour of command skills will generally be well-advised. Every organisation needs command, leadership and management, so the most pragmatic solution is usually to put together a team which can collectively offer all three, rather than waiting for a genius to turn up.

There are no born commanders

Leaders may be born or made, but nobody is born a great commander. The good news is that people of the right intellectual calibre can be taught how to give good direction: there is a very rich literature on strategy development, and

courses are on offer at every business school. Organisational development is a discipline in its own right. Sadly, however, the third core skill of giving direction – the formulating and communicating of guidance and instructions – is neglected.

One striking feature of the great commanders of history — the likes of Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Wellington, Grant or Moltke — is that they were without exception superb writers. Their outstanding powers of analysis, of synthesis and of decision-making would have been worthless had they not also been able to issue instructions in concise, unambiguous prose in a way that enabled their subordinates to grasp what really mattered and so galvanised their organisations into coherent, purposive action.

Command in business: directing

The trinity defines the work of the executive as much as the work of the officer. We need to talk about command as well as leadership, so we need a word for it. The one which suggests itself most readily is 'directing'. Whatever we call it, mastering the art of setting direction lies at the heart of what it takes to become an effective executive.

Implications at all levels

If we take the trinity seriously it has implications at all levels:

For individuals, it is a call to self-awareness: are you more of a leader who can rally the troops or more of a director who can think through a strategy? What mode should you be primarily operating in at any point in time?

For learning and development, it suggests a review of what skills you train people in and how you do it. Leadership is a personal thing which has to be authentically grounded in the

personality of each individual. Directing is a matter of technique. The organisation should decide how it is to be done and train everyone to do it in that way. That training should be centred on developing the thinking and writing skills that everyone has to learn in order to communicate clearly and simply.

For HR, there are implications about who we place in the top positions. Faced with a choice between a charismatic leader-type and a less inspiring but more thoughtful commander-type, we might be better served by the latter in the top job. But it is the strength of the team that matters — for example, a 'commander' as CEO, with a 'leader' as COO and a 'manager' as FD might be a good balance. The organisation needs all three. If you want to find all the qualities to the same degree in one person, you may have to wait a long time. Trying to teach cats to bark could take even longer.

In our endless debates about the nature of leadership, perhaps it is now time to cut through some of the noise and start acting on the lessons evident from the last 2,000 years of history.

References

1. Abraham Zaleznik (1992). Managers and Leaders: Are They Different? *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, reprint 92211.
2. Army Doctrine Publication Volume 2: Command, Army Code 71564, Chapter 1, § 0103.
3. Ibid., § 0105.
4. This model of leadership was developed in the 1970s by John Adair, and is the standard model taught in the British Army amongst others. Adair has expounded it for the business community as well in many seminars and books such as *The Skills of Leadership* (1984) Gower.
5. Jim Collins (2001). *Good to Great*, pp. 17 – 40. Random House.
6. Tom Peters (2003). *Re-Imagine!* p.44. 'More Collins, more claptrap' he trenchantly remarks. Dorling Kindersley.

This article is based on parts of Stephen's new book *The Art of Action – How Leaders Close the Gaps between Plans, Actions and Results*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011.