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# Debating Leaderless Management

## Can Employees Do Without Leaders?

# 9

# Beyond Leaderlessness: Even Less Than Nothing Is Way Too Much

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we argue *for* the content of leaderless management—thus, for the absence of any leaders and non-leaders—and we take the argument even further and argue against leaderless management as a concept. The leader concept can, because of our dialectical approach, only be defined in terms of what it is not, its nonidentity. This means that the non-leader concept is essential for understanding the leader concept. Non-leaders can be defined in terms of what leaders are not and it,

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therefore, involves, e.g., workers, employees, and members of the organization. However, it also involves a leader, e.g., losing his/her footing as a leader and turning into a non-leader. The non-leader concept is (re)activated whenever the leader concept is applied and vice versa. This means that strategies to end authority, order, and hierarchy enforcing all to become non-leaders will just re-activate the leader concept on a higher and more abstract level. We will further elaborate and argue for our approach in the current chapter.

We perceive the leaderless management concept as intended to reflect Kropotkin's (2005) classic Anarchists' ideal where organizations, as well as society, are organized without hierarchy, order, authority, and the production of surplus-value. The surplus-value must here be understood in Marx's terms (1993) and it is simply explained a matter of the employee adding more value to the product or service than he/she is being paid. This is a vision based on the principle of federalism, free communes, free associations, and free agreements created by free women and men. The vision, furthermore, involves self-governed, self-created, and non-surplus value organizations. Our chapter will uncover two interconnected challenges that relate to the significations (or connotations) of leaderless management. The immediate issue relates to the concept of leader*less* management since it presumes that there is "someone" (that is, leaders) being absent. To the contrary of this concept, we argue for another ideal based on the non-existence of leaders *and* non-leaders. To turn all into non-leaders (labor) receiving equal wages as suggested by Proudhon (2011) will just produce an abstract capitalist society (Marx 2019, p. 81) where capitalists are being replaced by a "social system" or "society," e.g., personified in the previous Soviet system by the apparatchiks.

The consequence of our position is that we reject Kinna's (2014) and Ward's (1966) Anarchist principle of fluctuating leadership as self-contradicting since replacing "fixed leadership" with "flexible leadership" will enforce others to become non-leaders and therefore continuously re-activate leadership. The second challenge connected with the connotations of leaderless management is the inability in present time to imagine a leaderless future without, consciously or not, reproducing the contemporary leadership and its uninhibited hunt for surplus-value which is

devastating for the inner nature, for other people's inner nature, and the external nature. Contemporary leaders and managers are installed in organizations to ensure the production of surplus-value (Marx 2019) and the production of surplus-value will therefore frame leadership and management. To exclude leaders and managers without canceling the hunt for surplus-value will not end the essence of leadership but just transfer the managerial tools and leadership to others.

## Against the Concept of Leaderless Management

We will in this section argue against leaderless management as a concept. Leaderless is a compound word composed of two parts: "leader" and "less". In connection, the expression connotes a social entity existing without a leader. The leader concept not only connotes a social entity with authority, hierarchy, and (social) order, but also it furthermore includes its contradiction: the non-leader. The non-leader is of essential importance since leaders and managers occupied getting aims through others (Mintzberg 2011, 2013), e.g., to ensure the production of surplus-value. The reason for the leader being absent is probably of secondary importance compared to the connotation of the image of a social entity being without and thereby, somehow lacking a leader.

We, therefore, argue that the expression "leaderless" presupposes the image of a social entity described in everyday language as an *organization*. The emerging image of the organization will, because of the absence of a leader, implicitly connote the meaning: an incomplete organization. The organization lacking a leader connotes the image of members of the organization somehow dealing with and probably also compensating from the present short (leader) supply situation. Following this series of connotations implies that the "natural" or "normal" configuration of an organization includes a leader and that the disadvantages of the leader's absence will force the employees to develop a strategy for compensating for the lacking leadership. Being "leaderless" connotes the image of an organization in an "unnatural situation." We argue against this assumption and claim that people neither need contemporary leaders nor that

the production of goods and services should be governed by a hunt for surplus-value.

We furthermore argue that the expression "leaderless" cannot stand alone but implies and reintroduces the leadership concept, which means the image of the contemporary leadership ideal and practice. To fully dismiss contemporary leadership implies rejecting the concept of "leaderless" or "leaderlessness" and it furthermore implies a consciousness developed in a social reality organized without leaders and non-leaders. However, if we, instead of connoting the absence of leaders, divide the expression in two and focus on "less" as an isolated expression, then we would connote the meaning of a minor portion or amount of something. This means that we deal with an organization containing a varying portion of or amount of leader(ship). No matter how we approach the expression "leaderless" is it impossible to break away from the impression that the organizational situation includes a leader either being present or absent.

Leaderlessness must, as a concept, be understood as the negation of and therefore interconnected with the leader/leadership concept. The leader/leadership concept cannot only be defined in terms of non-leaders as we did above. It must also be defined in terms of being in opposition to management.

We have in this section showed that the leaderless management concept which intends to produce the image of a social entity or organization managing without leaders is, in our viewpoint, erroneous since it requires and re-activates its negation: leaders and leadership. Re-activating the leader and leadership content makes it impossible to use the leaderless management concept to produce the desired leaderless alternative. After summing up, we will now extend our argument to show how the second part of the expression (management) produces comparable challenges.

To manage means to handle something and the expression is, therefore, interrelated with activities or action(s). Based on the meaning of the expression "to manage" we could probably expect that the expression "management," like a limp twig, somehow would cling to those handling something in everyday organizational life. By the expression "those handling something," we refer to the employees being involved in

the production of goods, products, and services. The expression "management" refers to those people (managers) overseeing the production and to those monitoring and controlling the work of the employees being actively involved in the everyday production. We have in the above argued against the concept of "leaderless management," but this does in no way—as we will see in the next section—imply that we are arguing *for* leader*ful* management.

# Against Leaders and Leadership

In the following two sections, we will explain our humanistic and political approach to a critique of leadership/management. We should probably also note that our humanistic critique of leadership/management is based on arguments found in the Kantian phenomenology. Thus, we do not mean to say that Kant intended or would have agreed in our use or misuse of his concepts.

## The Humanistic Approach

We find inspiration for the humanistic critique of leaders and leadership in Kant's (2017) ethics which is founded on a Christian belief. The Kantian idea is that humans must be an end in themselves and therefore should not be reduced to a means for something else. Leadership, as well as management, will as mentioned above be perceived as a common way of obtaining aims through others in the hunt surplus-value.

The most important issue is probably that human beings a priori must be considered ends "in themselves" and consequently that no one should in the name of surplus-value reduce others or themselves to pure means. Furthermore, such reduction of others to means will in our understanding violate the Kantian categorical imperative (Kant 2017) which requires that one must act in a way that enables one's act to be considered suitable as a general law of ethics. Since leadership and management are based on rationality where aims are obtained through others in the hunt for surplus-value it will inevitably result in reducing

others and in some cases probably also "self" to means. The latter probably requires slightly more explanation than the former. Reducing oneself to a means can be the consequence of self-management. Nevertheless, self-management is a complex concept since it applies to both leaders/managers as well as to their employees. In both cases, we argue that it reflects what we perceive as the immanent rationality founding management/leadership and further explained the following lines. One of us has previously explained self-management (Hertel and Fast 2013) as a way of outdistancing one from oneself to obtain aims, e.g., in connection with the production and exchange of goods or services. Self-management can be a matter of "self-reduction" probably somehow comparable to Buber's (2004) description of the fireman who becomes one with the process of feeding coal to the flames. It is the type of instrumentality Marcuse (2010) once defined as technical rationality. Where the former (Buber) is closer to our second key inspiration (Levinas 2020) and belongs to the Jewish (religious) phenomenology the latter (Marcuse) belongs to a political phenomenology represented by the first generation of the Frankfurter school (critical theory). In other words, we here see a meeting point for the humanistic and political critique of leadership/management.

So, the key argument against leadership is that participating in what we could call or define as the "leader/management game" results in others, and to some extent also the leaders/managers' selves are being reduced to a mean. This reduction of others and self contradicts the Kantian categorical imperative. However, when others are reduced to means is it both the result of and the constitution of immanent rationality included in the "leader/manager game." To focus on immanent rationality is not a way of downgrading the importance of the everyday physical and emotional interactions between actors. On the contrary, we find such interactions and the relation between actors determining the accessibility or immanence of everyday rationality. Our experiences are that the more one-eyed, commanding, and thereby authoritarian leaders/managers act during everyday interactions the more manifest will the rationality appear for the involved actors.

The humanistic critique of the leader/manager game assumes that immanent rationality influences and transforms the involved actors'

lifeworlds from otherness to sameness (Levinas 2020). It is a process reducing the complexity and the content of the lifeworld which enables the actors to fit the crippled simplicity of everyday rationality. Actors are not reducible to weak-willed creatures but humans accepting and, consciously or not, actively involved in fitting the frame of the "leader/manager game" and thereby the immanent rationality. We here use the Levinasian concept of otherness (Levinas 2020, p. 29) to refer to the lifeworld perceived as a stranger in the sense of being an absolute other and thereby free. The lifeworld's character of being another (otherness) is fading during the "leader/manager game" and language somehow seems to lose its capacity to mediate between lifeworlds. The domesticated residues of the actor's lifeworlds become controllable and simple (lifeless) technical tools in the hand of management and leaders. Technical is here intentionally applied since it is identical or at least comparable with Marcuse's (2010) concept of technical rationality. It is this rationality that reduces the human being to means and it is this reducible process transforming the human being to sameness.

## Political Approach

The political ground for arguing against leaders and leadership is shared by Socialists, Marxists and Libertarian Socialists. "[T]o fight for a new society in which there will be neither masters by birth, titles, or money, nor servants by origin, caste, or salary" (Reclus 2018, p. 72). With the quote of Reclus, we here pay a tribute to the Communards in the sesquicentennial of the Parish Commune of 1871. We will use the sesquicentennial as our opportunity to underline that the Communards argued *for organizing and managing without leaders.* Nevertheless, is it not our claim that the Communards were organized without leaders, but we do claim that the vision about managing without leaders was common among the Communards and especially among the fractions of Socialists and Libertarian Socialists, the latter also known as Anarchists.

One important aspect of the Socialists' and Libertarian Socialists' efforts was to encourage workers to take control of workshops and establish self-organized and self-managed cooperatives responsible to produce

goods and services (Schulkind 1960, p. 412). The difference between Marxist and Libertarian Socialists is that the Libertarian Socialists argue against leaders and leadership. Marxists critique mainly contemporary leaders and leadership for being a representation of the hegemony (Gramsci 1992) in society.

Contemporary leaders and leadership are both a sign of the exploitation of employees and a tool for increasing the surplus-value A consequence of the hunt for surplus-value is that the social relations between humans involved in the production become thing-like (dinglich) and that the relation between things (commodity) take the form of social relations (Marx 1982, p. 166). This is named reification and Marx uses the expression: *the fetish of the commodity* to describe how the reification is installed in modern society.

Critical theory and the Frankfurter School is of interest here since it illustrates an alternative strategy toward the critique of leaders and leadership. Adorno (2017) developed a method for an immanent critique of contemporary society and its cultural phenomena. The method uncovers inner contradictions in the phenomena studied and tends to show how the contradictions make the studied phenomenon fall from within. What we notice here is that the phenomenon studied (leaders and leadership) can be studied both from a position within and from without. The within position is bound to a critique of present conditions, and it does therefore not consider replacing leaders or leadership. Based on this, we conclude that Marxists and Neo-Marxists display a critique of the present leader and leadership. Neo-Marxists do not reflect on leaders or leadership in general while traditional Marxists turn to leaders and leadership as a means for transforming the production and distribution of goods and thereby the society in general. The Neo-Marxists and the Marxists contribute with insights but as positions, they are in this context probably not radical enough and we will in the following section turn to Libertarian socialism for a profound argument against leaders and leadership.

For Libertarian Socialists, the situation is slightly different since Anarchism means the government of the none, and consequently, we regard leaders and leadership as a problem in-it-self. However, using singularities and presenting Anarchism as a unified approach is a serious

simplification and probably also a mistake. Even a fast look at the historical and contemporary "Anarchism" clearly exposes a whole universe of highly varying Anarchist approaches and understandings. It is probably more appropriate to apply the metaphor of a variety of loosely coupled systems (Weick 2001) or maybe is it even better to use the expression of family resemblance (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 36) to describe the relationship between the large varieties of Anarchist's ideas such as Anarcho-Primitivism, Anarcho-Communism, Mutualism, Individualist Anarchism, Anarcho-Syndicalism, etc. Nevertheless, we will in this section stick to inspiration from the classic Anarchist tradition of Libertarian Socialists which includes Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon, etc. The Anarchists' tradition varies but Anarchists share the perception of themselves as the left-wing of the Socialist's camp. This also means that we object against private ownership and as a resulting protest the very existence of surplus-value (Kropotkin 1911, 1976, 2005, 2006). The classic Anarchists are against private ownership and the production of surplus-value since it conflicts with what they consider justice and the dictate of utility. Libertarian Socialists perceive leaders and leadership as the exercise of authority, order, and hierarchy. Therefore, we both reject contemporary leaders and even Socialist or Marxist leaders attracting followers to transform contemporary society. They strongly object to what we see as the state-socialism of Marxists and Socialists.

In this chapter, we pursue and outline our Anarchist's critique of leaders and leadership. We mainly follow inspiration from Kropotkin since he combines three essential elements. Firstly, a critique of the very existence of surplus-value, secondly a demand for radical democracy, and thirdly a demand for pursuing well-being for all with the lowest possible waste of human energy. Finally, we should probably note that Kropotkin's critique of the surplus-value is undoubtedly both different from and inspired by Marx's work.

# Against So-Called Anarkist's Organizations

We will in the following argue that existing descriptions of Anarchist's organizations will express either a past or contemporary social consciousness which makes such characterizations unsuited as a means for our ideal on self-organizing organizations and communities. We generally regard contemporary sketches (Kinna 2014; Parker et al. 2020) of Anarchist inspired organizations as a bizarre synthesis of elements from existing leadership and its negation.

We argue against the above-mentioned sketches of a so-called anarchist-inspired organization intended to handle authority or more precisely the absence of authority, hierarchy, and order. We furthermore disagree with Ward's (1966) description of Anarchist's organizations, and against Kinna's (2014, p. 613) fluid organizational practice. The temporary existing organizations are according to Ward (1966) expected to produce a time-limited spontaneous order. We think that the best way of describing Ward's principle is to apply the model of a Hegelian-inspired (Hegel 2019) process continuously bringing organizations and, therefore, leadership into existence, which furthermore implies a dialectical interplay between organizational being and nothing. The principle of a fluid leadership practice refers to the constant change of leadership (De Geus 2014; Land and King 2014, p. 926; Reedy 2014). Land and King (2014) furthermore argue that the essential idea in this principle is that the authority or leadership changes to ensure correspondence between competencies and tasks. We should probably underline that this approach is comparable with the idea introduced by Bakunin (2017) and which starts with rejecting a state of fixed and constant authority. He replaces it with a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and voluntary authority and subordination. To fully understand Bakunin's (2007, 2017) idea, we should probably add that his masterpiece rejects both state and religion, which he describes as an absolute authority and replaces it with a conviction of science. To glorify and express such a belief in science reflects Bakunin's contemporary enlightenment period.

Choosing authority, as Bakunin as well as the above-mentioned Anarchists suggests, is in the aftermath of populists such as President Bolsonaro, Trump, and Prime Minister Orban probably not the answer.

The idea about spontaneous order is neither a proper solution since the dialectics of organizational being and nothing is an infinite circle of re-established contemporary leadership, order, authority, power, and hierarchy. We need to bring Social Libertarianism to its extremes to obtain a new organizational practice where the past contradictions between leadership and non-leadership (authority and non-authority) have passed away. An organizational practice, where the principle of "well-being for all" (Kropotkin 2005) has replaced the contemporary marked logic. It would be a situation where both authority and the absence of authority are rejected because of a social consciousness enabling the creation of a production founded on the principle of "each in correspondence to his/her needs."

## Epilogue

We have in this chapter rejected the connotations connected with the leaderless management expression. As a result, we have rejected the leaderless management concept. The essential idea about managing without leaders can in our opinion only be expressed as the negation of leaders *and* non-leaders. This aim is in our opinion, unattainable within the frame of the leaderless management expression. Exchanging leaderless management with self-management appears at first glance obvious but must be rejected since it simply means managing the manageable. The concept cannot transgress reality and is, therefore, unable to silhouette the Anarchist's utopia.

Rhetorically we phrase the question: how much leadership is included in Leaderless management? When it comes to leaders, we do believe that even leader*lessness* introduces far too much leadership. If we were to present a sign following our organizational ideals it would be a sign which connotes an organization without leaders and non-leaders. We regard self-organizing as a means to express our organizational ideal and as a situation where all organizations, as well as society, are organized without hierarchy, order, authority, and surplus-value. It is an ideal involving self-governance, autopoiesis (or self-creation), and it discontinues the production of surplus-value. However, it is also a vision that

requires a social consciousness to come. This is the utopia of Libertarian Socialism and if we could exclude the possible misconceptions, we would upfront declare our support to the realization of Proudhon's (2011) watchword: "the government of the none."

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