

LEADERSHIP FOR ROMANIAN BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Abstract

*The present paper focuses on the use of the concept of **leadership** in Romania at present claiming that it is a “Western”, possibly American, set of values, attitudes and skills imported in the Romanian situation as a proof of a democratic society and a functional market economy. The present paper explores the role of leadership today, particularly in higher education, looking at the way the American model changed values and attitudes not only in the US, but also in Romania.*

Keywords: leadership, business education, universities, plagiarism

Introduction

The world literature on leadership and its various aspects has been growing rapidly in the second half of the 20th century and there are numerous studies devoted to the exploring, defining, discussing, materializing, implementing or re-inventing the concept. Nevertheless the Romanian literature covering the field of leadership is relatively scarce today probably also due to the sensitivity of the Romanian society to the concept of “leader” (strongly connected to the former dictator). It is interesting to note that even the term “leadership” is still used in its English version, for fear that the Romanian “conducere” (of Latin origin, therefore closer to the Romanian language) is still too strongly connected to the communist regime. Discussions on and about leadership (and particularly the lack of it in the Romanian society) are abundant in the media with a strong reference to the political field. However, the importance of the concept for business is crucial today and it is the business newspapers that publish translations and adaptations from foreign specialized literature for the use of the Romanian business people. The training offered for Romanian businesses in the field of leadership comes mainly from non-governmental organizations or private training companies who capitalize on the very few courses offered by the Romanian schools of higher education.

A world of leaders

The world has become smaller and more complex than ever. Wars and revolutions are broadcast live, to ensure transparency politicians debate vital issues in front of the cameras while decisions have already been made, cartoons may start the third world war, careers and/or fortunes are made and destroyed in a season, the world has truly become a stage and most activities are transformed into entertainment. Roles are changing and become more diffuse accommodating the input from the various cultures that make up a smaller, but infinitely more complex world in which people are no longer looking for the certainty of order and set rules, but to the answers possibly given by chaos, in which sheer numbers are transforming individuals into consumers. One of the very successful management gurus of the United States, Tom Peters, published in 1994 *Liberation Management* with the intriguing subtitle *Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties*, in which he explores the “voyage into the permanently ephemeral” world of the economy of post-industrial societies (Peters, 1992). We live in the age of data bases, performance indicators, customer value which are valuable only if they add value to the company balance sheet. Consumerism, massification, material culture are terms at one end of the spectrum recalling an endless search for increased productivity, increased earnings to lead to increased consumption as a material proof of happiness found and enjoyed by everybody. Globalization, democratization, complexity are at the other end of the spectrum and define the search for empowerment, equal opportunities, better living to lead to an ever elusive happiness, difficult to define in a world of changing values, and therefore even more difficult to reach.

What is the role of leadership in this complex world? And what is leadership in a world in which leaders of the market compete on CNN or local televisions with political leaders, with stars of the entertainment world, in other words leaders of show business, with leaders of the many industries or, more rarely indeed, leaders of knowledge and science, a world where there is no real place, at least in the mass media, for those who are not leaders - unless they place themselves in an extreme situation? In a world where the pressures to become and to stay a leader are immense, both at personal and at institutional levels, there is no place for followers: however the paradox is that leaders cannot exist without those they have to lead.

Raising the questions above it is obviously easy to continue with issues relating to our own immediate concerns and stemming from our own institutional experiences. The next question is obvious and particularly the answer(s) to it clearly needed: what is the role of the university in the shaping of tomorrow's leaders? How do we address the need for followership? Particularly in Romania, with our still fragile democracy, with the difficulties of our emerging market economy, the need to address the above questions and to find practical solutions to developing

leadership/followership skills and abilities to the youth who have the responsibility to change society are clearly very important. The present paper will address only one: the ethical attitude towards reaching success.

Exploring the concept

Leadership is a topic that has been very much discussed and appreciated recently in Romania and not only. A search on Google for “leadership” shows 872,000,000 entries which include the title of the immense number of books that have been published and continue to be published on the subject and of university or training courses that are constantly offered to the public with the promise of improved abilities and increased productivity. People everywhere in the world are interested in leaders and the quest to define attributes, abilities or competences that make leaders what they are or that leaders are born with are researched both theoretically, with the instruments of research methodology, and practically with the tools of market research¹.

The present paper claims that *leadership* is still a “niche” concept on the Romanian market. Discussions about the concept of *leadership* and particularly about the “lack” of it in present day Romania are very frequent with an overwhelming focus on the political scene (Nicolae, 2006). In the United States, however, the emphasis is mostly on the business world. Books on leadership focus mainly on business. At the 2005 annual conference on Leadership of the Kravits Institute of Leadership of Claremont McKenna College, Ciulla pointed out the way in which the American drive for leadership in business has changed the perception and understanding of human existence pointing towards issues that have been part of the human quest for the meaning of life all along history, but somehow seem to be neglected in today’s world.

In Romania the concept of *leadership* is still perceived as a “Western”, possibly American, set of values, attitudes and skills which have to be imported in the Romanian situation as a proof of a democratic society and a functional market economy. Although the Romanian term *conducere* exists and describes the same semantic sphere as *leadership* there is an unwillingness to use it in contexts related to business or politics due to its excessive use under the communist period and particularly due to the preference of Ceausescu to be called *conducător* (leader).

There has been, until recently, no systematic and dedicated research on *leadership* in the business field in Romania. Business newspapers publish translations and adaptations from foreign specialized literature for the use of the Romanian business people, but very few give examples from the Romanian business environment. The field of academic research is triggered, to a certain extent, by the developments in

¹ The search for the greatest Romanians of all times started, as a public endeavour, in the spring of 2006 giving rise to controversies: from the utility of such an enterprise to the methodology of research. Nevertheless, the public is interested as can be observed from the site of the survey www.mariromani.ro, where one can find that the research is a replication of similar activities that had been performed in the US, France, Germany, the UK, etc.

the field of the business media: the various rankings of successful business leaders in Romania (Capital Top 300 wealthiest men in Romania²; Adevărul 500 Miliardari³, etc.) as well as the publication of LIDERO, oameni de afaceri români de top (LIDERO, 2008) present a much contested and controversial overview of the field, while the academic research project LIDEROM (Neesham, 2009) attempts at offering an overview of the practice and education of leadership in Romania.

Training offered for Romanian businesses in the field of leadership comes mainly from non-governmental organizations or private training companies who capitalize on the lack of courses offered by the Romanian schools of higher education. There are very few courses on leadership at undergraduate and master levels in Romanian universities while in the United States there are special schools for leadership and most master programmes have leadership courses built in them. Western European universities also offer courses in leadership.

Looking westward – what is the cheating culture?

However, for most people in Romania leadership is an import mostly from the United States. This is a relatively expected state of affairs considering that Romanians have always had a strong American inclination: from the first economic emigrants to the United States in the 19th century to the desperation of the asylum seekers under the communist regime and to the second generation of economic emigrants after 1989, the “American solution” has been constantly in the mind of the common Romanian citizens, but also on the agenda of the politicians. What is the American solution, however, and how relevant is it still today when the crisis that the world faces is not only financial but also, and mainly, moral? More and more Americans raise these questions themselves and consider that they ended up by living in a cheating culture. Therefore, what is the cheating culture?

The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead is a book by David Callahan and published by Harcourt in 2004 which addresses concerns about the present increasing loss of moral values in acting to achieve quick success in almost all areas of human activities from the political and economic to the cultural and academic. Obviously Callahan looks at the American society and his claims and examples come only from a US background – as the subtitle of the book clarifies. However, the culture of cheating is not an abstract phenomenon, that unfolds mostly theoretically, in research induced, difficult to prove situations, or in a book written for commercial success, but a very real part of people’s lives who find it hard to deal with tough ethical choices that today’s society raises for almost all of us (Callahan, 2004, p. 298). The claim that Callahan puts forward in *The Cheating Culture* is that American society is characterized by a

² <http://www.capital.ro/index.php?id=113181&rss=1&screen=index§ion=articol>

³ <http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/capitala-averilor-de-top.html>

profound inequality and driven by a *winner-take-all* philosophy that has induced massive cheating in almost all areas: business, law, academia, entertainment and medicine. Since people started to live in a society with increasing pressure to produce more, sell more, consume more, continually strive for excellence and adopt the *sky-is-the-limit* philosophy, the desire and need to use shortcuts in order to meet deadlines and focus on profits and efficiency have become so powerful that more people will do anything to succeed, starting from a young age.

One of the most compelling analysis that Callahan does in his book is of the school and university environment which he considers responsible, among others, for the pervasive dishonesty among students and job seekers (Callahan, 2004: 224) materializing in an increased number of instances of plagiarism in papers, for students and academics, and in fabricated resumes for job seekers.

Callahan argues that this is the result, in time, of the attitude of schools and universities in which the interest is not on intellectual curiosity, but only on grades as the most visible and quantifiable measure of progress and development in one's studies. Callahan considers that this situation is partly the result of both parents and students strongly willing to get into elite schools as a sure passport for further studies, good scholarships and finally better paid jobs.

"The more general trend of rising income gaps across the workforce has also increased the stakes of education. "Over an adults working life, high school graduates can expect, on average, to earn \$1.2 million," reports the Census Bureau. "Those with a bachelors degree, \$2.1 million; and people with a master's degree, \$2.5 million. People with doctoral (\$3.4 million) and professional degrees (\$4.4 million) do even better." These earnings gaps have increased steadily over the past few decades. In 1975, workers with advanced degrees earned 1.8 times as much as high school graduates. This gap increased to 2.6 times in 1999." (Callahan, 2004: 214)

The income gap based on level of education is one of the main reasons quoted for the extraordinary increase in the behaviour of cheating and Callahan considers that *"business students are among those with the worst attitudes toward cheating, and those most likely to bring lax ethics into their professional lives. A 2001 study of 1,000 business students on six campuses found that "students who engaged in dishonest behavior in their college classes were more likely to engage in dishonest behavior on the job." With up to a quarter of college students typically choosing to major in business or a related field, and over 100,000 MBAs graduating annually, widespread cheating among business students is not an insignificant problem."* (Callahan, 2004: 219)

If we compare the above with the situation of Romanian students the first temptation is to consider that the situation is relatively similar in Romanian universities and schools. There is a constant and increasing wave of complaints against various types of cheating, the most common being plagiarism. Besides the

reasons valid for American students as well, such as the need to get excellent grades in order to secure or preserve scholarships and jobs, Romanian students also face a gap in the curriculum of Romanian universities which do not provide academic learning skills and writing courses in which the correct forms of quoting are studied and practiced.

Cheating, under the form of plagiarism, is one of the most widespread diseases of today's education system around the world and underlines a sad, but true change of values in today's society. The desire and the pressure to become better, smarter, sooner and with less efforts than before, while the pressures to have fun and enjoyment are increasingly present around us, explain why a lot of young people want to develop leadership abilities without focusing on the moral, ethical component of the process.

The export of soft power, among which the concept of leadership is prominent, controversial as it is (Preliceanu, 87), reached Romania with impact not always in a positive way. It is obvious in most aspects of social life from values that have changed to popular culture, from work ethics to the field of entertainment; it is also evident in politics where Romania has had its embarrassing moments in which its loyalty to the European Union had to be delicately balanced against its long love affair and commitment to NATO and the US. But it was evident, sadly, in our own cases of plagiarism that embarrassed public persons several times in the last few years.

Leadership à l'Americaine

Massification and democratization have fundamentally changed the world for better or for worse. Leadership used to be a concept defining the elites of any society. Nowadays the American concept of leadership, particularly in the context of business, means that everybody should be a leader in their own field. The pressures to produce more, sell more, consume more, grow more, save more, develop more have lead to strategies of reinventing permanently not only products or services, but also companies and even individuals.

After having studied what made the American companies successful in the '70s, after having analyzed the requirements of excellence in business (Peters & Waterman, 1982), Tom Peters insists that the only chance of survival for both companies and individuals is to constantly drive to become leaders in their field by total commitment for constant change. At company level Peters puts forward the concept of the "curious corporation" (Peters, 1995) that is the only one capable of survival in the uncertain world of today. The way to achieve such a corporation is, in Peter's view, by fostering new interaction patterns and by creating a physical environment that allows project teams to gather at a moment's notice, lets people clearly express their personalities, encourages getting together and hanging out and

aggressively ignores traditional functional groupings. He gives numerous examples of corporations which saved themselves from disappearance by applying the above strategies, the best known being Oticon, Denmark, and Asea Brown Boveri, Switzerland.

In order to evaluate the degree of curiosity of a company Peters suggests ways to “measure” curiosity. Managers should ask their employees to submit for their semi-annual performance reviews a one page essay on the oddest thing they’ve done during the year off the job, the craziest idea they’ve tried at work or their most original screw-up on the job or off.

Peters considers that successful companies are those that manage to motivate each of their employees to become entrepreneurial on the job, to be willing to assume the responsibilities of leadership in certain projects while being confident and willing to become followers in other projects. This can be done by hiring curious people, people that do not have a perfect attendance record or a perfect resume, but are committed to change, to research, to completing tasks and achieve success. However, Peters underlines that managers should insist that everyone takes vacations and should support generous sabbaticals.

Although Tom Peters visited Romania in November 2005 the impact of his teachings on Romanian management is relatively small. His books have not been translated into Romanian yet and the relatively few people who know his work consider his principles rather exotic and difficult to apply in the Romanian business culture. Students, nevertheless, consider his proposals and claims as very powerful and necessary in order to change business behaviour to what it should be in order to allow Romania to become competitive in today’s integrated economy.

Conclusions

The concept of leadership in business is still relatively little used in Romania. It has been imported from the American culture, but it still has to be adapted and internalized in the Romanian business environment.

The American concept of leadership is a result of democratization and massification: everybody should be a leader in their own field, with its undesired effects on laxer values and attitudes towards morality.

The Romanian concept of leadership, in transition as the Romanian society itself, is more directive and constraining which should point at the need for strong measures against the tendency to adopt cheating behaviours from early on in life by students (later business leaders) while strengthening the education and updating the curriculum with academic study skills and writing courses.

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