



Mary Follett on the Leadership of 'Everyman'

Nanette Monin and Ralph Bathurst

abstract

Mary Parker Follett wrote on business administration almost a century ago. Leading management scholars today generally agree that although often invoked and lauded her work has never been widely read or discussed. Our paper argues that it should be. Our close reading of *The Essentials of Leadership* demonstrates that Follett's ideas about leadership are not only seminal to current leadership theory, but are also more complex than readings to date have acknowledged. Follett argues that the primary responsibility of leadership is to discover the sense-making thread that structures understanding of the 'total situation', establish the 'common purpose' that emerges from this, and by leading, 'anticipating', make the next situation. But paradoxically, because time ensures that the situation is always transitory, it is always finally unknowable to the sense-maker. Leadership entails working with limited understandings. Reworking these abstractions, Follett also argues that leading and following are not antithetical because both should be lead by common purpose. Her arguments subvert the word 'leader', for her text ultimately suggests that a leader is 'Everyman'.

Introduction

In our forgetting of the foundational theory of Mary Follett (Graham, 1995)¹ there has been no forgetting of the leader-manager of today – that very late twentieth century invention, the material celebrity with the hefty remuneration package – because he² was absent, not there, never in Follett's writings to be forgotten.

Follett wrote of 'leadership' as a necessary management skill, and of those carrying out the functions of 'business administration' as 'managers', but never of a hero leader-manager. Although rhetorically ubiquitous notions of the hero manager in one guise or another are as widely taken for granted in established management theory as in guru books, our paper demonstrates that he was not conceived within the rich, enfolded

1 All the eminent management theorists who authored chapters in Pauline Graham's book speak in one voice of the on-going absence (since her death in 1933) of any substantial representation and/or discussion of Follett's contribution to management theory.

2 Although Follett often wrote women of diverse stature and interest into her theory she always wrote of her manager and leader subjects as 'he'. In this gender bias she was of course simply voicing the conventions of her historical time. While writing about her writings we have reflected this historicism.

layers of Follett's dignified prose. Notions of the celebrity 'leader-manager' so familiar today proliferated rapidly after Drucker (1955) had proclaimed the emergence of 'a new leading class', but where other theorists have represented their leader-managers in images that range from that of those born with a moral birthright to command lesser men (Taylor, 1911/1967) and the leader of a new leading class (Drucker, 1955); to the good cowboy out in the wild west (Mintzberg, 1973) or an American world-ruler (Kanter, 1984); Follett's manager is simply and humbly responsible to and for others (Monin, 2004).

That Follett did not assume that managers are born with, or should aspire to, the kind of status we have chosen to accord them today may well be one sound reason for our forgetting what Mary Follett's seminal work had to teach us about 'business administration'. Other comment has offered many alternative explanations for lack of interest in her theories: in the twentieth century climate of aggressive labour relations her texts were thought to be subversive (Drucker, 1995); her contribution was discounted because she lived at a time when women struggled for recognition in a man's world (Kanter, 1995); it is not her gender identity that has been problematic but that her ideas are innately 'feminine' (Stivers, 1996); she was a positivist espousing managerialist theory (Taced-Sherrif and Campbell, 1992; Newman and Guy, 1998); she was also an anti-positivist in a scientist world (Calas and Smircich, 1996); she was both reasonable and romantic (Parker, 1995); and although she is unpopular because she champions individualism, she is simultaneously misread as preaching the subjugation³ of the individual to the welfare of the group (Tonn, 1996). Debate of this order illustrates that recognition of plurivocality in management theory is alive and well.

There are though at least a couple of ironic twists to this excited argument: while we generate energy around our reasons for not reading Mary Follett's management theory we still do not read her; and because we do not read her, we neither discuss nor contest her theories. Yet amidst all of the debate noted above it seems to be a given that we do know of her work and that we ought to be reading it; for although they continue to be seldom read, her theories of what she called 'business administration', have been consistently lauded through generations of scholarship.

Mary Parker Follett, a new-world woman who was as much at home in cosmopolitan European cities as she was in the rural seclusion of Vermont hill-tops, was undeniably a pioneer, a foundational management theorist. Our paper offers a close reading of her lecture on 'The Essentials of Leadership'. It was originally delivered in 1933 to the newly formed Department of Business Administration at the London School of Economics (University of London) as one of five lectures by Follett in a series entitled *The Problem of Organisation and Co-ordination in Business* (Urwick, 1949: vii). In 1949 Urwick published all five lectures as well as a sixth, 'The illusion of final authority' (delivered at a meeting of the Taylor Society in 1926), under the collective title *Freedom and Co-ordination: Lectures in Business Organisation by Mary Parker Follett*. This collection was reprinted in 1987 and published by Garland Publishing, New York and London; and this is the publication to which our references to 'The Essentials of Leadership' all refer.

3 Follett writes of the group in which an individual is self-actualised.

Like all of the other five lectures in this collection of Follett's work edited by Urwick, 'The Essentials of Leadership' was prepared for delivery to an audience of business administrators, but in this published version, though it does not claim the genre, it takes on the appearance of a formal essay, which can be defined as:

any short composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, [or] persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject. [It does not pretend] to be a systematic and complete exposition, [is] addressed to a general rather than a specialized audience... [and] discusses its subject in non technical fashion... often with a liberal use of such devices as anecdote, striking illustration, and humour to augment its appeal. (Abrams, 2005: 103)

In this paper we will read Follett's lecture as an essay, and will explicate our close reading of it in a commentary that moves casually between dominant and critical approaches, an approach to text analysis described as 'togglng' (Monin, Barry, and Monin, 2003). But because it is easier we think to explain in a clever, readable way what a text lacks than to explain exactly what it achieves, and having done our share of the former – see for example Sayers and Monin (2007); Monin and Monin (2003, 2005) – in this paper we intend to focus primarily on the latter aim. In a poststructuralist world it is a given that every reading of a particular text offers just one of an infinity of possible interpretations, and that no one reading escapes the bias inherent in an individual reader's response. Since our reading is also bounded by a word limit we are self-consciously choosing to use the space we have to show why Mary Follett's essay on leadership is a classic, a work to which we may return again and again as we continue to mine its rich meaning.

As we complete our close reading of this text, we will also refer to Kenneth Burke's theory of logology to support the notion that the word 'leader' has evolved to a point where the identity that managers have had imposed upon them is now dependent on what Burke denoted a god-term; and we will suggest that if this is so, then we may have finally reached Follett's historical moment. In his logological theorising Burke argued that over time certain key words accrue more and more power: as language itself propels an upward drive the constructions that we attach to these words are weighted with ever-increasing status. Eventually a hierarchical end-point is reached and language doubles back on itself: it somersaults backwards through its own etymology, looking to recover its own historic meaning.

In both popular usage and leadership theory there is evidence to suggest that the word 'leader' has become a god-term. Over time we have seen, higher ranked administrators renamed managers and better managers denoted leaders. But now the best leaders are called leaders of leaders (Teo-Dixon and Monin, 2007), or 'exemplary leaders' (Heard, 2007), and in the rhetoric of business language the word leader has come to connote power, wealth, status, celebrity and even fame. Noting this historical development, in our paper we hypothesise that if 'leader' is now a Burkean god-term, and is therefore about to turn turtle and take all its connotative trappings of celebrity wealth, power and social status with it, we may at last be ready to return to Follett. She writes not of a class of leaders but of the leadership that is enacted in different situations and at different times by diverse people.

Our reading of Follett's chapter on 'The Essentials of Leadership' (Urwick, 1987) attempts to give the logological drive at work in 'leadership' a good shove. It demonstrates that almost a century ago Follett was denying the designation 'leader' all the celebrity status that has since accrued around it. Follett asked us to think less about leaders and more about the meaning of 'leadership'. If we are ready, now, to listen to her voice then we may already be enacting a logological leap back towards recognition that leadership is a communal, not individual, achievement.

And yet our reading also concludes that from within all the permutations of ambiguity and paradox that play through Follett's text, a composite picture of an ideal leader/manager/person (in Follett's text each term is embodied in the other two) does emerge. As she tells it, enacting leadership that seeks to best serve common purpose, entails acknowledging our limited understanding of both the situation in which leader leads, and of what the optimum group outcome might be. Follett's leader, even while he endeavours to enact the skills and traits of leadership that Follett imports from the contemporary literature and extensively discusses, also tries to understand, and work with two elusive abstractions, transitoriness and polyphony.

At first her discussion of the leader's need to understand the total situation is underpinned by her emphasis on the transitoriness of that situation (leaders must accept that even as the situation is being understood it is already changing). Then, within an all-encompassing contextual irony, she links the dilemma of living and working within the province of relentlessly passing time to her discussion of the purpose of leadership. As she describes it, the primary responsibility of leadership is to attempt to discover the sense-making thread that structures understanding of the total situation; but just as time is constantly dissolving the situation, so it never exists other than in its passing, so too polyphony, the play of multiple meanings, ensures that any final capture of the meaning of a situation is as elusive as the pursuit of time itself. Follett's paradoxical insistence that the unattainable is worth pursuing offers one more possible reason for our discard of her wisdom; and distinguishes Follett's voice from that of her own contemporaries as well as ours.

While working with these abstractions, Follett also argues that leading and following are not antithetical: both should be led by the common purpose discoverable, but never completely discovered, in the 'total situation'. Attempts to approximate as best the leader can what the ever-developing situation is, and then to determine the best outcome for those being led, is the leader's on-going challenge; and should determine the action outcomes that sense-making dictates when pursuing that which best benefits the greatest number. However, Follett does not advocate a reductionist view. The common purpose is not unified into a single narrative but is rather alive with possibilities; where multiple readings of the ever-changing situation allow for creative and new solutions not yet considered.

In all of this Follett's image of a leader is no more nor less than that of an ideal 'Everyman'.⁴ He does not exist because he is an ideal: but the potential to become an ideal leader is the birthright of the ordinary person, of every man. In the archaeological chip that contains almost all of the leadership theory constructed since Mary Follett first delivered her lecture on management leadership, there is an 'ideal' leader who is a bit like you and me.

Follett's Contemporary Voice

Follett's lecture, 'The Essentials of Leadership', opens with a challenge to contemporary established leadership theory. She tells us that the psychologists – whose leadership tests she has tossed aside with the scornful question "What on earth has all this to do with leadership?" and dismissive answer "I think nothing whatever" (p. 48)⁵ – that "These psychologists were... *assuming* that aggressiveness and leadership are synonymous", that "the leader is usually *supposed* to be one who has a compelling personality" (p. 48, our italics). As critical twenty-first century readers of her early twentieth century management theory, we settle in for a comfortable read, and it grows more comfortable as she continues to comment on 'long accepted' (p. 47) notions, and even, finally, the 'superstitions' (p. 58) on which accepted notions of management practice are based.

These accepted notions, these superstitions, she categorises as 'old-fashioned' (p. 47), the "old method of procedure" (p. 56), but her language also constantly depicts these 'old practices' as aggressive. Although her voice maintains its gentle, conversational tone, managers and management are portrayed in terms of dominance and militancy. On just one page (p. 48) she writes of both psychology and the business world assuming that leaders need to be 'autocratic', 'aggressive', 'masterful', 'dominating', 'compelling' and 'imposing': of their assumptions that leaders need 'self-assertion' and 'pugnacity' for they must 'militate', 'lay down the law' and 'give orders'. She writes of the young boss of a gang who as an adult showed no power of leadership in his community not "*in spite of* his dominating traits but *because of* them" (our italics). She goes on to write of managers who hold "the whip hand" (p. 58) and tells us of her intense dislike for the simile of a writer who "says that running a business is like managing an unruly horse" (p. 48).

Persuasion, as an attribute of leadership, though not as extensively indicted as domination, is Follett tells us, just as 'out of fashion' in the best run industries: *knowledge* is the first requisite of leadership (p. 50). Her prescience in prioritising knowledge is directly followed by her survey of what might still today be accepted as a summary of all the essential elements of leadership. Against all "the theory of the past" (p. 49) she juxtaposes her (then) very different view of leadership in the 'best-managed' industries (p. 49), naming and discussing as she progresses through her lecture, all the

4 Originally attached to a character in a sixteenth century play morality play, the term 'everyman' now suggests 'the man on the Clapham omnibus': a hypothetical ordinary person who is reasonably well-informed and responsible, but without special skills or status.

5 All references to Follett's text are to 'The Essentials of Leadership'.

main leadership theories promoted in the contemporary leadership literature of today. Situational, contingent, transformational and psychodynamic, path-goal and leader-member, skills, style, trait and team – the theories of leadership discussed in contemporary literatures are all introduced here.

Noting the skeletal listing above we might well conclude that although Follett may have achieved a prodigious feat of imagination and foresight, and may even have made an early contribution to the later flowering of elemental leadership theories, her text is very much just an interesting historical stepping stone. Reading through the sudden little flurry of comment on Follett that has followed hard on the heels of *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management* (Graham, 1995) it does seem that courteous dismissal along the lines of: 'this is historically interesting but has little to tell us that we don't already now know', is still the predictable response of contemporary leadership theorists. We contend that where this is the case, it is a response based on a cursory reading, or worse still, on a second-hand knowledge of Follett's writings.

Our own readings of 'The Essentials of Leadership' reveal Follett pushing sense-making in all the familiar contexts noted above, way out beyond what twentieth century leadership theory customarily displays. Her leadership theory is as multi-faceted as the endlessly passing, and infinitely varied moments she positions at the core of leadership awareness when decision-making is called for. Yet through it all she argues that the leader has one over-riding task. The leader's job is to pull on the thread of meaning that seems to structure the situation and discover within it the action that will result in the most satisfying outcome for all involved while at the same time holding each resolution lightly.

Close Reading

Close reading as practised by Richards, and the North American movement that based their approach to reading on his so-called 'new criticism', can take us a very long way into the meaning of a text. With its emphasis on thematic ideas and imagery, paradox and ambiguity it may well propel us as far as we wish to go. But when it seems limiting it is most often because it does not encourage us to delve into the spaces, the unfinishedness, and the othernesses that intimate their presences as we read – and invite on-going exploration. Nor does it accommodate awareness of the role of the reader in meaning-making, and its adjunct, reflexivity; the role of inter-textuality in both construction and reconstruction; nor even, striving as it does for the one 'right' reading, the play of polyphony.

Noting the limitations of Richard's approach to reading, we have nevertheless worked with the emphasis on internal meaning-making it prioritises, while also acknowledging the mysterious realms of doubt and possibility that a more post-structuralist approach would accommodate. Close reading can tell us in great detail, about the woven themes, the pattern of imagery, the plays on meaning which both display and bind all the elements of Follett's text, but in order to open up 'The Essentials of Leadership' to deeper inquiry, to tease out something of the mystery of the amalgam of mystery,

wisdom, fame and discard that is the history of response to Follett's teaching, we must go beyond close reading to closer than close reading – to deconstruction.

In our close, and sometimes closer than close, reading of Follett's 'The Essentials of Leadership', we explore just three of the thematic strands that weave through it. We begin with comment on Follett's constant return to a juxtaposition of past, present and future time as she discusses from one angle after another the ways in which we must pursue understanding of 'the total situation'; we discuss some of the rhetoric that emotively charges her emphasis on the creative role of leadership (as distinct from 'leaders'), and the personification of the ultimate leader, the abstract notion of 'purpose' (p. 55); and we tease out Follett's play on the paradoxical notion that the better the leader the less the leadership required.

Time – and the 'Law of the Situation'

Because Follett had discussed the need for managers to recognise, and work with, the 'law of the situation' in an earlier lecture in this series, she refers back to that, her lecture on 'The Giving of Orders' (Urwick, 1987) when she says in the second sentence of her opening paragraph: "As I have said in the more progressively managed businesses an order was no longer an arbitrary command but – the law of the situation" (p. 47). In the earlier lecture she had argued that what she was choosing to call "finding the law of the situation", equated to the "depersonalising [of] orders", and is preferable to the "issue of arbitrary commands" (p. 24). Now building on this idea she argues that in order to find the law of the situation we must understand 'the total situation': and that the total situation: " includes facts, present and potential, aims and purposes of men" (p. 51). She argues that the leader's primary responsibility is to try to "*find the unifying thread* in this welter of facts, experience, desires, aims" (our italics) and to attempt to see "the relation between all the different factors", to see the situation as a whole, in its totality. For Follett this thread derives from the entire web of relationships that comprise an organisation, and rather than becoming a mechanism with which the leader can exploit and control outcomes, instead offers the paradox of the part representing the whole which in turn represents the contributing parts. Sense-making as 'the unifying thread' has never been described more succinctly.

Follett's emphasis on the need for leaders to be aware of the complexity of each unique situation is, in contemporary leadership theory, something of a cliché: but the knowledge basis on which she claims leaders must lead is not. Her lecture works towards the paradoxical acknowledgement that what she has just described as the central responsibility of the leader can never actually be accomplished. Because the total situation is never static, and is therefore only experienced in passing moments of time, it cannot ever be fully realised. The situation is gone, past in the moment that it is experienced, and replaced by a future moment. Leaders must attempt to make sense of the moment, recognising all the ramifications of its complexity, and simultaneously, as best they can, act *on behalf of* common purpose, the invisible leader discovered within it (p. 55), fully aware that the situation is changing as they act. In sum, leaders must act, and take responsibility for their actions, while dealing with their recognition that they do not, cannot ever completely understand the total situation on behalf of which they

act. Follett's humility (time is a mystery beyond our imaginings) and her 'negative capability',⁶ (she accepts that we must live in doubt, confusion, and limited understandings) establishes her voice as unique in the canons of management theory, where we are more often bombarded with assurance and assumed closure.

Although of course she never used the phrase 'social construction' Follett essentially argues that at no point does our socially constructed world have a knowable presence – every moment of construction is no more nor less than the outcome of the past moment and a prelude to the next. And yet, she insists, at a practical level we must operate within the context of both this limited understanding, and an on-going (doomed!) attempt to fully understand it. Even as we structure what we can of the total situation by looking for its unifying thread it dissolves into what was once future time, had become the present and has already passed. There is, ironically, no total situation: but the central responsibility of leadership is to understand it and act on behalf of the common purpose it reveals.

Images of time, past, present and future are woven into the entire fabric of this lecture. Again and again the past is juxtaposed with the present and both are set in place against the future: "old-fashioned theory" is being replaced by business as conducted "today" (p. 47); past theory is compared with "today" (p. 49); order-giving of "the old kind" is being ousted by that which is "coming to be" (p. 49); "domination is going out of fashion" as "wiser teachers say" (p. 50); "business is becoming", "men are learning" (p. 50) and by the time we reach the essay's mid point we are primed to learn that the leader must not only:

understand the situation, must see it as a whole, must see the inter-relation of all the parts... [but] must do more than this. He must see the evolving situation, the developing situation. His wisdom, his judgment, is used, not on a situation that is stationary, but on one that is changing all the time. (pp. 52–53)

This is the foundation from which Follett constructs the paradox at the heart of the leader's responsibility for making sense of, and making manifest, the total situation. Although the whole endeavour of the leader must be to attempt to understand all the inter-relationships that in total form a situation, and to then share this understanding with all those involved in it, there is no moment in which it can be fully experienced:

In business we are always passing from one significant moment to another significant moment, and *the leader's task is pre-eminently to understand the moment of passing*. The leader sees one moment melting into another and has learned the mastery of the moment. (p. 53, our italics)

Thus when Follett claims that the deepest "mastery of the moment" demands that leaders knowingly work with transitoriness – even as the leader is visioning a future from both past and present, moment melts into moment and the present is already the past – she also makes it clear that she is setting an impossible challenge. She justifies this by insisting that our attempts to understand, and to vision an ideal outcome, even as

6 In a letter written in 1817, the poet John Keats used the term 'negative capability' to describe the mind capable of appreciating that intellectual acceptance of mystery and doubt is preferable to 'irritable reaching after facts'. He instanced the mind of Shakespeare as supremely capable in this respect.

we simultaneously acknowledge this to be an abstract notion, will enable us to better accept the complexity of the transitory moment while meeting the demands of practical leadership. Ultimately this will make for better leadership practice. And *making* (as very recently 'discovered' and theorised by Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers, 2004 , 2004) is what leadership is about.

'Anticipating' we make, we create, the future – for, as Follett flatly points out “We usually have the situation we make” (p. 53). And the quality of this making depends upon the knowledge that resides in the leader’s recognition of the inter-relationships that structure the situation. The “welter” (p. 61); the “kaleidoscope of pieces” (p. 51); the “scattered forces” (p. 52); the randomness of “sometimes in one... and sometimes in another”; of “facts, present and potential”, (p. 51) that in combination make up all the “experiences and desires” (p. 51), the “aims and purposes and men” (p. 51) challenge the leader’s perception of the total situation. While it is the leader’s primary responsibility to recognise and understand “the *relation* between all the different factors” (p. 51, our italics) in the situation, this is not finally enough. The leader must do far more, must “see the evolving situation, the developing situation” (p. 52) for, as Follett repeatedly insists, the situation is not ‘stationary’.

Leading as ‘anticipating’ Follett argues, “means far more than meeting the next situation, it means *making* the next situation” (p. 53, our italics). The leader is a ‘maker’, *poetas*, the poet, subject of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and as she writes of the creative force of leadership Follett’s own voice begins to merge with that of her depicted creative leader. As she creates ‘new theory’, Follett describes her ‘conception’ (p. 47) as something that is “forced on us” (p. 47) by business activity: business leaders “penetrate to the subtlest connections of the forces at their command” (p. 52) in order to “*make* all these forces available and most effectively available” to finally serve the one true leader, “the invisible leader” (p. 55), common purpose.

Follett’s Rhetoric

When she writes of ‘making’ Follett’s language takes on a fecund richness. From the straight-forward “conception” (p. 47) of new business practices that she describes in the early pages of the lecture, and the ‘becoming’ (p. 50) of its development she moves within two pages to comment on her own maxim – business success depends on our having the situation we make – that “no one sentence is more pregnant with meaning” (p. 53). Engendering the new is the theme she most intimately interweaves with that of time. When she combines this imagery with energy words such as ‘blaze’ (p. 53) and ‘explode’ and ‘dynamic’ (p. 55) her rhetoric promotes that which she really cares about, advocating a recognition that the ‘new’ way of business is very different, very creative, very energised and should draw everyone, everywhere into its paradoxical, all-consuming ‘making’.

Yet Follett the master rhetorician is also unique among foundational management theorists in overtly recognising that her own tools, ‘words’, can also be misleading, even treacherous, and never more so than when they box in theories. As an antidote to their deceptions and limitations Follett throws the ideas they perpetuate into stark

opposition with experience, with what actually happens in the work-place. Insisting (in 1926) that we have been too slow to see that it is followers who provide leadership, who enable leaders to lead, she says of authors who write only of the following role of followers: "these authors are writing of theory, of words, of stereotypes of the past" (p. 54). In the face of all her own attempts to make words work overtime for her, to call them into play as she tries to untangle the mysteries of time, being and action, she finally pushes all words aside as 'tired theory' and replaces them with experience, the practice of management 'told' by what happens.

Much of the rhetorical power that prompts response to this text stems from plays on juxtapositions and antitheses that mirror the play of parity and disparity in metaphor. Burke famously noted that metaphor is

a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this. (Burke, 1989: 247)

and in rhetoric all yokings of the one with the other work in a similar way – word choices and placements emphasise, by connection that which is different even as they link that which is similar. In this text Follett again and again places a *this* against a *that*, the one against an-other. She sets images of aggression and domination against co-operation and common purpose; the old against the new; theory against practice; abstract against concrete; and unity and totality against fragmentation and chaos. All these yokings have similarly intensifying effects, but even as they clarify and explain the concepts and qualities about which she is writing, Follett's simplifying and excluding binary arrangements of her text simultaneously inspire an (otherwise unfounded) confidence in the surety of its meaning.

The persuasive impact of this kind of rhetorical balance – the seeming justice of acknowledging opposites – is notably called into play when Follett carefully sets 'difficult theorising' alongside her anecdotal story-telling. Her stated aim is to encourage better leadership at a practical as well as theoretical level; and when her anecdotes successfully encapsulate the theory, her story telling is almost Platonic. When Plato, in his dialectal treatise *The Republic* analogises the necessity for the philosopher king of his ideal state to have absolute authority, he likens him to a ship's captain: ships he stories, would run aground if democratically governed by all aboard. Follett, though she argues against totalitarian leadership, also illustrates the power of a captain's leadership – in a situation where delegated leadership (in this case to the boat's pilot) has endangered all aboard. Explaining that it is not for the leader to either dictate or delegate but to bring others to their own understanding of 'what needs to be done' she relates one of her many stories of personal experience. She tells of her experience aboard a ship that had run aground in rattlesnake infested waters. When the crew refused to enter the water to push the boat off, the owner jumped overboard: "Every member of the crew followed" (p. 57). Here Follett does not tease out the strands of the total situation, common purpose and leadership action that her anecdote illustrates. She simply shares 'what happened', telling the story and leaving her readers to draw their own conclusions. Complicity is a great persuader, and Follett draws her readers into her argument by making space for, and respecting, their readerly sense-making.

Leaders or Leadership?

Follett's lauding of such spontaneous heroism suggests that her text might be after all a prescription for a hero-leader of superhuman strength, intelligence and sensibility. Not so. Paradoxes within paradoxes provide her text with yet another kind of powerful antidote to this sentiment. Her imaging of the total situation has revolved around a paradoxical notion: that the leader's challenge is to manage within the transitoriness of a moment in which we both live our past and create our future even though it is impossible to fully experience that moment. An interweaving paradox of the leader's role plays through this image: in Follett's text there is, finally, no such thing as a leader. There is only leadership.

Although we are all always followers in certain moments, in particular situations, any one of us may be called upon to share our expertise. Within such a call to leadership we remain followers, for 'common purpose' is the invisible leader of both leaders and followers (p. 53); and "loyalty to the invisible leader gives us the strongest possible bond of union, establishes a sympathy which is not a sentimental but a dynamic sympathy" (p. 55). When Follett personifies 'Common purpose' as the ultimate leader her trope effectively argues for leadership, not leaders. This position leads her into the paradox that is central to her argument: because leaders are not leaders but the servants of 'common purpose', the better the leader the less the leadership required. Leaders and followers are both, essentially, followers who are "following the invisible leader, common purpose" (p. 55). The leadership of the leader of leaders (p. 57), common purpose, is enabled by 'leaders' of all positions, personalities and functions (p. 52); and these kinds (p. 58) of leadership can all be learned (p. 58). It is on the basis of this argument that Follett questions the notion that leaders possess any 'final authority', deeming it illusory.

It is her intention she tells us, to "explode" the "long-held superstition" that "leaders are born not made" (p. 58), and it is in this sense that her leaders are everywhere: everyone is a potential leader. And yet, she argues, the most effective of these leaders will have the least leading to do. Because we are all as leaders more essentially followers – ultimately looking to the leadership of the common purpose that sense-making reveals – effective leaders enable the followership of all, themselves included, to enthrone leadership and demote leaders. Follett constantly reminds her readers that the function of a leader is to implement the dictates of the 'leader of leaders': an abstract notion, common purpose (p. 57). As leaders we are responsible to point others to the 'leader of leaders'. Common purpose is endlessly waiting to be discovered in the total situation, and we must look for it in our 'mastery of the moment'. It is to this node of Follett's teaching that we are returned again and again: to her belief that if we allow the 'law of the total situation' to be the over-arching guide to action it will also guide the discovery of leadership itself as the only rightful leader.

In what sense is a metaphysical play of ideas such as this practical? As Grint (2007) has recently reminded us in a discussion of Aristotle's *phronesis*, wisdom is practical. If the result of attempts to understand the paradoxes and ironies of leadership and organisational experience is that we better understand the infinite web of relationships, desires and motivations at work in every situation; and if attempts to grasp the total

situation enable us to better understand the leadership that will work in the best interests of all, then wisdom does have a practical outcome.

Visioning the leadership that the future calls for, Follett cites Wells': "his hope for the future" she reminds us "depends on a still more widely diffused leadership" (p. 59). And if the time is right to not only remember Follett but to also begin to teach and attempt to put into practice our understanding of what she understood, then the logological drive (Burke, 1961) that is pushing along the increasingly weighty etymology of the term 'leader' may at last be about to take a tumble. Her lecture envisages a new era in which individual leaders, as we presently think of them, will no longer exist. The abstract notion of 'leadership' will replace them.

Follett is 'difficult'?

Attempts to convey this kind of ideality are never complete or even satisfactory. And since common purpose can only be supposed through our attempts to grasp the always transitory total situation, much as leaders are not, essentially, leaders, so too the total situation is never finally the total situation for it is always in the process of becoming another situation. It is its past and its future. It is also its present but the elusive present moments that it is the leader's 'pre-eminent task' to understand, are endlessly 'melting' into one another (p. 53). There is no present. Like the Heraclitean fire, we can know it only through its passing, and "the leader's task is pre-eminently to understand the moment of passing" (p. 53).

It is basic to our human condition that we do not arrive – being always in the process of becoming, paradoxically to become is to die. So Kanter (1995) is right when she claims that Follett is difficult – she may certainly seem so in the company of other management theorists. If Kanter is right Follett's 'difficulty' may explain why comment on her theories published within the discipline of management by those who have claimed to understand her, and to have made her theory their own, has tended to whittle down her texts into skeletal mis-representations. In contemporary comment on management leadership theories there is little trace of the complexity, irony, and ultimately the many layered paradoxes, that in Follett's teaching convey the mystery and metaphysics that inform the core of human experience.

But then again Follett is 'difficult' – though she is wise her ideas are impracticable – only if we assume two functionalist positions: that meaning is fixed; and that it is the role of the management theorist to provide firm, immediately and widely applicable, guidelines for action based on irrefutable truths. Given that throughout her texts Follett plays with paradox, irony, ambiguity and the juxtaposition of antithetical notions – and ultimately advises that we "act, whatever our theories, on our faith in the power of the invisible leader [common purpose]" (p. 55) – we can safely argue that Follett herself did not subscribe to either of these positions. Instead she challenged the fixed ideas that were bedded into the theory of her time, and offered a parade of anecdotal experience, to support the play of abstract theorising that challenges her readers to think about concepts such as time, situation, motive, purpose and the common good. That we endeavour to discover the common thread of the total situation, attempt to understand

its significance and then follow the common purpose that seems to emerge from the particular situation is her seemingly simplistic, but elusive contribution to management theory.

Certainly Follett's teaching is not easy to apply. Yet management practice at every level of the organisation informs and permeates her ideas. Changing and renewing these practices is her declared objective. In anecdote after anecdote she tells us that the leadership theory she has distilled from history, psychology and literature is also informed by her experience of business administration, the work place and her personal relationships. She draws on the lives and wisdom of people working at all levels of organisations whom she interviewed, observed and with whom she participated in numerous organisational projects.

Art or Science?

As she has done through this lecture, Follett promotes an image of management as both an art and a science and business as becoming a profession (p. 60). It is a science because as she has repeatedly insisted, we must analyse every situation methodically and consistently. That is how learning develops. Despite the mockery of psychology's leadership tests with which she sets the stage for the presentation of what were then avant garde ideas, she demonstrates elsewhere that she is well-read in and respects this discipline and the learning it offers management theorists. As she moves towards her conclusion, Follett states categorically that "leadership is not the 'intangible', the 'incalculable' thing" we have often seen it described as. It is "capable of being analysed into its different elements, and many of these elements can be acquired and become part of one's equipment" (p. 59). Her imagery at this point could not be more concrete: 'equipment'. We are back with function and the tools of management, but always in qualified terms: 'many' elements are 'capable of' being analysed.

Yet because, as she consistently argues, business is both an art and a science, if we are to manage it scientifically then we must understand it philosophically. As Follett herself attempts to call up the ideals and future we vision, the common purpose we must imagine, and a perception of the total situations that we experience, she repeatedly reminds us that we must work with both metaphysical understandings and learned methods.

Experience then provides Follett's knowledge of administrative practice, but anecdotally she returns to the arts when she attempts to convey the contextual play of irony, ambiguity and paradox within which she works and writes. She reminds us that in *Alice in Wonderland* "[Alice] had to run as fast as she could in order to stand still" (p. 53); and yet even as she is pulling in the authority of great writers to rhetorically support her arguments, in a more reflexive moment she defends this rhetorical practice. Having explained that "what might be called the consent of the governing" is "suggestions coming from below and those at the top consenting" (p. 54), she insists that she is "not trying to imitate Shaw and Chesterton and being paradoxical" (p. 54). In other words she is self-consciously aware that she may be accused of trying to be clever, intending a bit of intellectual fun. Not so. She argues that only through paradox

can she attempt to explain the complexity of the total situation and the web of the social networks that is integral to its evolution. Hence leaders:

must prepare themselves for business as seriously as any other profession... they must assume grave responsibilities [if] they are to take a creative part in one of the large functions of society. (p. 60)

They must also respond to the teasing challenge of the always incomplete. Follett notes that it is the 'left-over' in any decision-making situation that is most valuable. In the left-over, the 'carry-over', there is the wiggle room that all words, Follett's included, and our own, allow. The 'left-over' as we conclude this paper, is the elusive meaning of 'left-over':

It is the left-over in a decision which gives it the greatest value. It is the carry-over in a decision which helps develop the situation in the way we wish it to be developed. (p. 53)

This is the aporia that waits in the wings to be prized apart, explored and described. For now, as we conclude our reading, we are heeding Robert Graves *Warning to Children*: although we have dared 'to untie the [first] string', Follett's text is still 'a neat brown paper parcel'. But if with other readers we could

... dare to think

Of the fewness, muchness, rareness,

Greatness of this endless only

Precious world in which [Follett] say[s]

[We] live

then we might all 'untie [another]... string'.

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the authors

Nanette Monin is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management and International Business on Massey University's Auckland Campus, New Zealand. She reads poetry, writes about management theory, and is the author of *Management Theory: A Critical and Reflexive Reading*, Routledge, 2004.
E-mail: N.Monin@massey.ac.nz

Dr Ralph Bathurst is a musician turned organizational theorist. His PhD is in Management from Victoria University of Wellington and his primary research interests focus on how artistic engagement assists management practice.
E-mail: R.Bathurst@massey.ac.nz