

## Leading without authority

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Many of us have mixed feelings when we hear the word authority. It may be due to a negative experience where someone violated our trust, or due to the vast amounts of information we receive nowadays about leaders in self-help books. Either way, we can see a strong relationship between the concepts of authority and leadership. If we want to know the exact relationship between these two, we first need to define whether they are different concepts. Consequently, we can know if one can exist without the other, and thus state that leadership can exist without authority or vice versa.

“Language is a metaphor for experience”, states Ph.D. Lidia Yuknavitch in her memoir, *The Chronology of Water* (Yuknavitch, 2010). This coincides with what Urban talks about in his book *Language and Reality*, where he states that language defines our reality (Urban, 2014), and thus the distinction between authority and leadership becomes crucial for our society with mixed feelings about the role authority plays. The beginning of our current leaders starts with us clearing our minds about what it means to be a leader and what it means to have authority.

Let's look at the example Martin Luther King Jr. set with his movement during the late 1950s and during the 1960s, since he is one of the big figures when we think about leaders. Ronald Heifetz wrote an interesting analysis of him in his article *Debate: Leadership and authority*: Martin Luther King had moral authority over his followers, where people were authorizing him to voice a point of view. However, he had no power to hire or fire them, that is, he had no formal authority. Additionally, he had no formal authority nor moral authority over the people he wanted to lead, the people that did not care to discuss his causes whatsoever (Heifetz, 2011). From this we can conclude that in fact authority exists in different degrees, and thus authority can be seen as a spectrum. This spectrum and its values are what Heifetz calls types of authority (Heifetz, 2011). As seen with Martin Luther King's example, leaders surely must possess at least one type of authority, but not all of them are required by definition.

Allan Cohen and David Bradford also discuss the issue of authority and leaders in the article *Influence Without Authority: The Use of Alliances, Reciprocity, And Exchange To Accomplish Work*, and indirectly contribute to the notion of the need of a type of authority in a leader by stating that “people are influential only so far as they can offer something that others need” (Cohen et al., 1989). From this we can highlight again that a leader, or mass influencer, can be considered as such only if he or she provides, and in order to provide for someone else, the leader must be *authorized* to some degree. That is, a person cannot be a leader without at least a certain degree of authority, but it is a fact that leadership seeks the mobilization of people over whom the leader has no complete authority (Heifetz, 2011), in order to solve group challenges. It's almost as if stating that a leader cannot exist without authority, but also cannot exist with full levels of it.

“Authority means the direct application of hard power”, as stated by Owen Hughes in the book *Crossing Boundaries in Public Management and Policy* (Hughes, 2013). From this we can also draw conclusions on why a leader cannot exist without at least some degree of authority: a leader must accomplish something, and the root of any action is power.

After accepting a degree of authority into the definition of leadership, one must ask: is a leader with the minimum degree of authority considered ‘worse’ than a leader with more degrees in said spectrum? Formal authority allows a person to perform actions following a defined structure; and, as Heifetz states, we need leadership in ecosystems that tend to lean towards change (Heifetz, 2011). Thus, a full spectrum of authority present in a leader forces him or her to attach action to a structure, avoiding change and effective leadership. In other words, “working across boundaries means using soft power or leadership” (Hughes, 2013), like Hughes mentions as well.

We can also continue along the lines of this idea of leadership being the soft side of power by extrapolating it to the opposite, stating that authority is the hard side of power, the one that attaches us to a structure. In this resides authority’s benefit, because there is an evident role of authority in our daily lives, in the family unit, in the concept of a nation – all of those exist due to the virtues of authority.

Therefore, a leader with a minimum degree of authority means a greater dependency on structure, and a leader with a higher level of authority leads to “working across boundaries” (Hughes, 2013). This may explain the involvement of the concept of leadership in revolution, change and often a discomfort of the hierarchy we study in every historical event, such as the French Revolution, The Illustration or even The Russian Revolution (Stoner-Weiss, 2006). Authority, by its nature of power due to expertise (Cohen et al., 1989), may not even provide answers when an innovative challenge arises from an adaptative pressure. Thus, we can say that different degrees of authority in a leader are required in varying scenarios, and a leader with a minimum degree of authority cannot be considered less important than a leader with a higher level in the spectrum since its effectiveness depends on the situation.

In modern days, it is important to keep in mind the role of language in our reality. This realization formed the platform where we discussed the difference between authority and leadership, in order to state what would be the scenario of a leader with different degrees of authority, and even question if there exists a possibility of having none, which was not the case. Heifetz exposed the example of Martin Luther King (Heifetz, 2011), from who we developed the idea of leadership always having a minimum degree of authority, since it involves action, and action involves concrete power. Thus, the level of authority in a leader determines its attachment to a delimited structure, and this does not necessarily mean one leader is better than another, since authority’s structure is vital in numerous circumstances of our lives and innovation across limits is crucial to overcome adversities.

References

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