

LEADERSHIP
Without
SILVER BULLETS:

A Guide to Exercising Leadership

Phillip Ralph

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**Leadership Without Silver Bullets:
A Guide to Exercising Leadership**

Phillip Ralph

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Foreword

Does the world really need another book about leadership? A quick trip to the local bookstore reveals we are almost drowning in a sea of literature on the subject. The majority peddle a variation of the "Great Man" theory of leadership: leadership is for those special individuals born with a rare and mythical set of qualities who step forward at the right moment with the right answer. Some offer an easy path – follow a few quick, easy steps and you too can have what it takes to be a great leader. Many are simply management tools – worthwhile but distinct from the leadership question. Plenty of leadership *with* silver bullets! Frankly, most of these books are not very helpful to anyone serious about exercising leadership on tough, complex challenges in the 21st century.

Phillip Ralph's *Leadership Without Silver Bullets* offers a refreshing antidote to this plethora of stale or simplistic notions of leadership. Phil approaches the topic with an unusual combination of clarity, honesty and insightfulness. Through the story of his leadership journey, Phil shares his own struggle, the lessons and personal transformation that enabled him to see the world differently, reframing leadership from something mythical and elitist to an accessible activity with the potential to transform our organizations and our world.

Reading *Leadership Without Silver Bullets* reminded me of a wonderful quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes:

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity. I would, however, give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Phil explores the complexity of leadership with a simplicity that allows the reader to access the wisdom borne out of years of hard practice and learning – not a false simplicity offering trite answers or solutions, but a simplicity borne out of years of the “hard yakka” of teaching and consulting in tough, complex environments combined with deep thinking and reflection.

Phillip possesses another great quality, again sorely lacking in much leadership literature, namely, humility. His writing, like his practice, lacks ego. His words serve the readers’ needs and learning. Having had the privilege and pleasure of working alongside Phil in a classroom setting, I have observed his careful, understated and skilful approach. Like all great practitioners in any realm, it looks effortless but reveals someone who knows their craft and is able to serve a greater purpose. He is not afraid to challenge our assumptions, thinking and behavior, but does this without arrogance or censure.

At the core of his work is a deep love of learning and a profound curiosity. He is equally able to learn from his own children as from CEOs he has coached, or some of the leading thinkers and intellectuals of our times. They all have something to offer, to hear, and to learn from. He shares these insights with us like a generous gift.

So, do we really need another leadership book? When the book is as accessible, practical and wise as Phillip Ralph’s *Leadership Without Silver Bullets*, the answer is a resounding “yes”. I hope you agree and benefit from his shared knowledge and understanding.

Robbie Macpherson
Head
Social Leadership Australia (The Benevolent Society) Sydney, Australia

What people are saying about *Leadership Without Silver Bullets...*

"I have had the privilege of seeing the results of Phillip Ralph's work as a leadership coach. He is outstanding. I can highly recommend this book as both practical and inspiring with valuable insights on how leadership in organizations really works."

Michael Rennie
Managing Partner
McKinsey and Company, Australia and New Zealand

"This work exposes many of the myths about leadership and presents a very clear and practical guide to what *effective* leadership is really about. Any organization would benefit by following the principles outlined to raise the bar on leadership and organizational performance."

Louis Hawke
Managing Director of Retail Distribution
Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Limited (ANZ), Melbourne, Australia

"A compelling, insightful and practical guide on leadership. Drawing on wisdom from historical figures, leadership experts and the author's personal experiences, it is a call to action for leadership in the 21st century. Phillip has done a great job of not only synthesising the latest in leadership theory but adding new and practical insights that will assist anyone who is passionate about their own leadership journey or making a difference in their places of work."

Mark Priede
Head of Culture Strategy (Australia)
National Australia Bank

"Phillip has done a fine job in debunking the modern myths on leadership, whilst constructing an accessible and eminently applicable model for today's organizational challenges. He demonstrates that leadership is shared and it's fluid, and the best leaders are those who enable others to lead, at any level of the organization. I commend this work to any who want to see real change and growth in themselves and their organization."

Greg Camm
Chief Executive Officer
Superpartners, Melbourne, Australia

"Engaging style, easy to read, great mix of theory and live experience. Phillip Ralph has written a practical handbook for leaders who want to dig deeper, and transform themselves and their organizations. Courage required. Faint-hearted types advised to steer clear of this book."

Phil Clothier
Chief Executive Officer
Barrett Values Centre, United Kingdom

"*Leadership Without Silver Bullets* is a must read for anyone who seeks to be a successful leader in today's world in any capacity, whether in an organization or the community. Phillip Ralph exposes some of the flaws in traditional leadership thinking and offers a fresh paradigm which calls us all to respond to differently to the adaptive challenges we face. The book provides a practical model to use to develop leadership at all levels of an organization."

John Fogarty
Chief Executive Officer
St John of God Hospital (Ballarat), Australia

"This is not just another book claiming to deliver the secrets of leadership success. Instead, through the use of thought-provoking examples and practical ideas, Phillip shares his unique take on what defines real leaders. The Seven Spheres of Leadership Mastery model will clearly assist organizations and HR professionals by providing a platform and language for discussing leadership capability. It certainly has influenced the way in which I think about what makes a great leader."

Shaneen Argall
Director, Human Resources
SMS Management & Technology, Melbourne, Australia

"Phil has an amazing ability to quickly and succinctly help the reader get to grips with the world of leadership development, its history and its challenges. Where Phil has 'nailed it' is in his Leadership Declaration. This insight lets us understand that effective leadership is not just in the hands of a chosen few but rather we are all leaders in our own rights and can make a difference in our communities and businesses by applying a few simple but powerful techniques. Most importantly, it expresses the need for true leaders to be values-driven and to have the courage to do things differently. Underpinning his thinking are years of practical leadership development experience, robust models and the use of pragmatic examples that every leader can relate to."

Anthony Youds
Director
Crossroads Human Resources, Melbourne, Australia

Leadership Without Silver Bullets: A Guide to Exercising Leadership is an informative read for anyone who leads a team and is seeking guidance on how to achieve employee engagement. Through personal experiences and straightforward analysis of recent leadership studies, this book reminds the reader of the modelling from school days to boardroom, which has led to the dominance of uninspiring, individualist, 'command-and-control' management styles. This thought-provoking book may well be the catalyst for readers to develop a shared leadership approach to allow their disempowered teams to flourish."

Erin Duncan
Learning & Development Manager
Merck, Sharp & Dohme, Sydney, Australia

"As the CEO of a children's charity determined to create a better world for children experiencing disadvantage, investment in our people is paramount. When our work is about making sure that vulnerable children have what they need and resources are limited, then it is imperative that we can actively unleash our collective capacity and wisdom to make a difference. *Leadership Without Silver Bullets* is an accessible read that inspires reflection and determination to be the kind of leader that not only brings out the best in everyone, but enables the change that we want to see in the world."

Mandy Burns
Chief Executive Officer
Ardoch Youth Foundation, Melbourne, Australia

Preface

Whether corporations succeed or fail, we somehow usually end up talking about the *leader* and his or her *leadership*. These words are also often used whether *real leadership* is present or not. We often assign a role to the word "leader", rather than an action. Despite this, there seems to be almost a crisis of leadership identity. Am I a leader? What does that really mean anyway? For example, I've asked hundreds of groups (mostly executives and senior managers) what they think leadership means. I get almost as many answers as there are people in the room. I am also dismayed by the largely wasted expenditure on misguided leadership development. Sadly, *leadership* is perhaps the most overused and abused word in modern organizational language.

While this book is not about trying to settle the leadership score once-and-for-all by coming up with 'the one right view', it does aim to provide a fresh and useful perspective for you, the reader, whether you are a member of a board, a chief executive, executive, middle manager, HR professional, or someone who chooses to make a difference. While I would not claim to have invented a new paradigm (another overused word), my hope and intention is that my small contribution in this book and ongoing work builds on the emerging new paradigm in a meaningful way.

In Part 1, *Leadership Today and Why It's Not Working*, I will share with you some of the things that I and others have learnt trying to understand and navigate the often messy territory of leadership, whilst drawing on my twenty years plus journey working with literally thousands of leaders in dozens of different industries and roles. In Part 2, *Why Most Leaders Don't Lead*, I will present an argument on why I think we generally do not lead effectively and make the case that effective leadership is more important than ever before. In Part 3, *A Leadership Declaration – Our Vision for the Future*, I will present a fresh approach to leadership – one that provides more clarity and focus on where and how we need to develop leadership capability, irrespective of role or title. Finally, in Part 4, *The Seven Spheres of Leadership Mastery*, I will bring our Leadership Declaration to life through a 'rolling case study' and real-life examples. During this process, my hope is that you will take the opportunity to reflect on your own leadership and how it relates to who you are, your work and the world around you that you influence in some way every day.

By reading this book I hope that you become clear about the type of leadership that you need and want in your own organization, and that your own leadership journey is enriched in a tangible way.

Phillip Ralph
Melbourne, Australia
February 2010

Chapter 1

Introduction

*The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance
– it is the illusion of knowledge.*

Daniel J. Boorstin (1914 – 2004),
American historian, professor, attorney, and writer.

Follow the Leader

At a very early age, I learned that the leader was the person out the front, showing everyone what they needed to do and where they needed to go.

Like many young children I was taught a *game* at primary school called *follow-the-leader*. I dare say you were taught this exact same game, or perhaps a slight variation (does *Simon Says* ring a bell?). The game basically entailed a designated leader positioned out the front giving orders and demonstrating to others the required path and actions. The *followers* (in this case a group of rowdy five year olds) were meant to do and say exactly what the *leader* told us to do and say. If you didn't comply, the consequences were severe and swift, accompanied by cries of "*you're out!*"

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they needed to do.*

4 Part 1: Leadership Today and Why It's Not Working

I continued to receive many messages about leadership during my formative years and later when I entered the workforce. "Leader" and "leadership" were terms used in many different ways and in many contexts, including in sport, politics, at home, community groups, the military and, of course, in organizations.

As a keen new entrant to the workforce, I soon noticed that those in *...people were called excellent leaders if they were able to co-ordinate and control people and resources better than others could.* positions of *formal authority* (usually managers who were in charge of other people and resources) were bestowed the title of "leader", usually when they managed the people and resources as expected. These same people were called *excellent* leaders if they were able to co-ordinate and control people and resources *better* than others could.

I remember one executive-level manager, for example, in a government department (where I briefly worked for six months!) who was responsible for many smart professional people – *yet ran the department like a school*. He had devised a myriad of rigid managerial controls and supervisory tasks to make sure "no one stepped out of line". The place was devoid of energy and enthusiasm, yet he was touted as a key leader because he (apparently) managed well, with everyone else following – just as I had also learned and experienced in my primary school days.

There were also heavy expectations on leaders to know more than everyone else, particularly regarding the technical aspects of their job. And *ipso facto*, they were also expected to possess more answers to the

problems faced in organizations. Again, managers who seemed to have more answers than others were rewarded, usually by being called a leader. This made perfect sense to me. "Isn't that why leaders are paid more," I thought? Not much has changed today regarding these expectations.

Politics, People and the Pros

My beliefs and views about leadership, similar to just about everybody else's on the planet, continued to be influenced by the people and events around me at the time, as well as from people and events in history.

In politics, Winston Churchill, known mainly for his leadership during World War II and his memorable speeches, was called a great leader by many, despite him being voted out of government as soon as the war was over. ⁽¹⁾ In the military, people such as Alexander the Great, known for his tactical ability, his conquests, and for spreading Greek civilisation into the East, were also touted as leaders. Leadership from this perspective was about *taking charge, exercising the full force of one's authority – and winning at all costs.*

Leadership from this perspective was about taking charge, exercising the full force of one's authority – and winning at all costs.

6 Part 1: Leadership Today and Why It's Not Working

I later learned about and admired Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (better known as Mahatma Gandhi), the pre-eminent political and spiritual leader of India during the Indian independence movement.

Leadership through this lens was about influencing others to make a positive difference in the world.

Gandhi inspired civil rights movements and freedom across the globe. Leadership through this lens was about *influencing others to make a positive difference in the world.*

Then there were the iconic sporting heroes I idolized as a child (the "pros"). These were the men and women who seemed to achieve amazing athletic feats and were often admired for their leadership qualities. Locally, there was Sir Don Bradman, whose cricketing prowess and gentlemanly character was unsurpassed. In basketball, I loved watching Michael Jordan who seemed to have the ball on a string and knew ahead of time what was going to happen on the court. Within their own sports, they were often called "heroes" and "leaders" by many. Leadership in the sporting arena for me was about *fulfilling one's potential, pushing the limits of what is thought possible, and, above all, conquering the competition and surpassing one's own self-imposed limits.*

Leadership in the sporting arena... was about fulfilling one's potential, pushing the limits of what is possible, and above all, conquering the competition and surpassing one's own self-imposed limits.

Despite *leader* being used in so many different contexts, I thought I knew what effective leadership meant and what you had to do to be called a *leader*.

Chapter 2:

Leadership and the Elite

We learn more by looking for the answer to a question and not finding it than we do from learning the answer itself.

Lloyd Alexander (b.1924),
American author

Leadership Confusion

As a result of my early experiences I learned that our view of what it means to be a leader is shaped from the time we begin to learn the alphabet. In my mind at least, I also learned that leadership was largely inaccessible to the masses. In early adulthood then, I had the mindset that to be a leader you need to be one of four types of people:

In my mind at least, I also learned that leadership was largely inaccessible to the masses.

to be a leader is shaped from the time we begin to learn the alphabet. In my mind at least, I also learned that leadership was largely inaccessible to the masses. In early adulthood then, I had the mindset that to be a leader you need to be one of

- a heroic leader on the battlefield.
- someone who holds high public office (or similar).
- an elite sportsperson, or
- a senior person in an organization.

8 Part 1: Leadership Today and Why It's Not Working

I suspect that many people have learned, perhaps subconsciously, that real leadership is unattainable for them also.

Before you dismiss this idea out of hand, I am constantly surprised by how few hands are raised when I ask the following question of a

group or team: "How many of you in this room consider yourselves to be leaders?" *You can almost smell the deprecating self-analysis!*

*You can almost smell
the deprecating
self-analysis.*

In fact, our beliefs about leadership are shaped by so many different people, sources and contexts that it's almost incomprehensible. Is it any wonder that we are confused – firstly about what leadership actually is, and secondly, *whether I am worthy enough to call myself a leader.*

Over time, however, I came to the realization that my view of leadership was *overly simplistic*. As is the case with many domains of life, and

Over time however, I came to the realization that my view of leadership was overly simplistic.

frustratingly so, the more I learned about leadership, the more I realized I *didn't know*. As a result, I became interested (and subsequently fascinated) in trying to work out what made people "tick". I was particularly

interested in leadership and the dynamics that existed within teams, particularly given their *critical nature* to the success of most organizations.

The Seduction of Having the Answers

I pondered many questions. What did real leadership look like? What qualities or attributes were needed to be an *effective* leader? Why were some people called leaders and others not? What was the difference between *managers* and *leaders*? Why were some people successful in life while others with apparently equal talent and motivation were left to languish? Why were some people in organizations able to inspire others and bring out their best while others were loathed?

Perhaps coincidentally, or because of my *fascination in understanding human potential* in the context of leadership, I was called upon more and more to help organizations develop their leadership capability and team performance.

As I moved into different positions and roles in organizations, a theme began to emerge. Others started to look not just for guidance around leadership and team performance, but also expected *the* answers to many of the *big leadership questions* previously posed. The more people asked, the more I felt *compelled* to give them the answers, so I happily (and naively) provided

The more people asked, the more I felt compelled to give them the answers ...

Paradoxically, the dilemmas I had observed leaders wrestle with...was now happening to me – I just couldn't see it.

what I thought at the time was the answer. I was seduced by the lure of having to "know it all".

Paradoxically, the dilemmas I had observed leaders wrestle with almost daily in having to have *the* answers to a myriad of organizational

problems was now happening to me – *I just couldn't see it.*

10 Part 1: Leadership Today and Why It's Not Working

As I became more entrenched in leadership, team development and culture change programs, I began to reflect on my *deepest beliefs* about leadership and indeed people. Were people just resources to be *managed* and *controlled*? Could sound management *and* effective leadership co-exist within the one person? With its emphasis on *leadership, followership and control*, was our whole management and leadership paradigm *flawed*?

I thought more about Churchill's speeches. While they were clearly of world importance at the time, they seemed a million miles away from my own

I thought more about Churchill's speeches and while they were clearly of world importance at the time, they seemed a million miles away from my own life...

life and reality. I further examined my limited beliefs about who could exercise leadership and under what circumstances. I also began to understand that while managers and leaders *can* be the same, *few* managers actually *led* effectively.

In my view, there was very little correlation between a person's job title and what they actually did. Some of the most junior people I had the privilege of meeting displayed *real leadership*, while people with many more years of experience and had risen to senior positions *often failed to lead effectively*. Many had become *frozen* by their own fears, expending unnecessary energy trying to maintain their status and ego whilst political game-playing.

I remember one “change team” I worked with (in a consulting capacity) in a major financial institution that was collectively responsible for the implementation and integration of major systems worth several *billion dollars*. The team was so *inwardly focused*, however, that I was amazed they *achieved much at all*. Team members were instead putting a lot of energy and focus on protecting their own “turf”, one-upmanship, and destructive side-conversations to undermine each other, therefore ensuring that the status quo was largely maintained. Added to this scenario was the head of the team who insisted on punishing deadlines that had created (or at least contributed to) serious personal problems (with relationships, health, etc) in the team.

We worked with the team over a couple of months and saw almost a “complete turn-around”. Experiences like these created an even hotter fire in my belly to understand why some perfectly *rational, intelligent* people act in a perfectly *irrational and very unintelligent way* in teams, and why so many people in these situations *fail to lead effectively*.

And so continued my *quest* over twenty years to identify “the answer”.

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About the Author

Phillip Ralph is a leading consultant to CEOs and executives and he partners with organizations to achieve breakthrough leadership, team and organizational performance. He is an author, coach, facilitator and keynote speaker. Phillip is the founder of the consultancy firm, *The Leadership Sphere*.

His areas of expertise are leadership development, team development and cultural transformation to enable clients to achieve their strategic goals. Phillip has twenty years experience working with a diverse number of clients in Australia and internationally. The proprietary methodology employed by TLS integrates a systems view *with* a whole-of-person approach, supported by a diverse range of commercial, government and senior corporate experience.

Phillip's clients are predominately ASX100 organizations (or equivalent private firms) in diverse industries including banking and finance; legal, accounting and consulting firms; industrial companies, health, as well as not-for-profits. He works with CEOs and executives as an executive coach and facilitates several innovative leadership development programs. His experience includes working with McKinsey & Co, focusing on leadership development and building relationship and consulting skills for large professional services firms.

Prior to founding The Leadership Sphere, Phillip spent six years with the highly successful and innovative ANZ cultural transformation program called *Breakout*, where he was the Head of Consulting and Program Delivery. *Breakout* has been widely acclaimed as one of the best examples of a successful cultural transformation program in the world.

Phillip resides in Melbourne, Australia with his wife Kerrie and three children (13, 13, and 9 years old). His hobbies include keeping fit by jogging and cycling, vicariously participating in many sports, reading, aviation and dining.

Contact/Organization details

The Leadership Sphere was formed in 2007 by Phillip Ralph and Associates, who have a long history of supporting organizations to create *breakthrough performance*. The Leadership Sphere (TLS) partners with organizations to achieve sustainable high performance through a powerful multi-disciplinary approach, focusing in the areas of leadership development, team development and cultural transformation. Our point of difference is a structured systemic approach to achieve realistic and sustainable positive change leading to *breakthrough performance*.

Our prestigious clients include a wide range of major companies across the public sector and private industry, many of whom are Top 100 ASX companies. We have services in all states of Australia and in the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Spain and the Netherlands.

Why Do We Do What We Do?

We do what we do for one simple, yet compelling reason – and that is our strong desire to see every individual, team and organization unlock the potential and energy that will make all the difference.

Who do we work with?

- Managing Directors and CEOs.
- Senior executives.
- Leaders.
- High potential/fast track employees.
- Leaders in transition.
- Organizations that want high performance cultures (including increasing engagement).
- Teams who have a desire to excel.

We work with senior leaders and teams at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and group levels. By working at multiple levels, we are able to help our clients achieve significant shifts that stick.

We are renowned in the marketplace for the following:

- The desired change happens (individual, team and organizational transformation).
- We have a transparent business model. There is a clear scope of work and costs.
- We deliver what we say we're going to deliver.

Our Values

Our values are important to us. These are the non-negotiable minimum standards to which all our work and dealings apply. These values are not a high aspiration we strive for, but rather the way we do business. When we are true to our values, our clients know it.

Customer

Being the best for our clients means a customer-driven approach rather than a provider or product driven approach. This may seem pedantic, but it makes all the difference. Many consultants and coaches start with their paradigm or framework and fit that to their clients rather than other way around. At TLS, we work back from the client's needs and customize the approach to optimize outcomes.

Partnership

We adopt a partnering approach for several reasons. Firstly, we prefer that our clients have energy and buy-in around the reasons we were hired in the first place. The desired change will simply not be self-sustaining otherwise. Secondly, we consciously work to transfer skill and knowledge where applicable. This helps ensure a system which is self-reinforcing and sustaining. Thirdly, it is more enjoyable for both us and the clients when we work together to solve problems.

Ethical Practice

Ethical practice means never compromising our own integrity or that of our clients. Again, many consultants and coaches collude with the client system by “selling in” products and services that don’t address the true underlying issues. While we can provide you or your people with off-the-shelf products, we will always alert you to the pros and cons. Practicing in an ethical manner means that we work in the best interests of our clients, not us.

Leadership

Leadership to us means being at the forefront of the latest thinking from around the world so we can bring the best to our clients. It is also reflected in how we engage with all our stakeholders, be they clients, suppliers, government or our own people. We believe that we can make a powerful difference in the world, both through leaders and by being leaders. Making a difference means enabling people to be all they can be, regardless of the organization, culture, gender, race or age. The bottom line is people living more fulfilling lives in a sustainable way.

Courage

Being courageous comes in many forms. For us, however, it means being bold and different as consultants. It means doing things differently from the pack – creating value beyond the norm by putting ourselves out there. Our consultants and coaches need to demonstrate and model the behaviors that we ask of our clients, whether they are a senior leader or a team that feels stuck. We need to be prepared to go to the hard places to help our clients.

Excellence

It means striving to be the best in whatever we do, not so we can say we're the best compared to others, but so we can say we were the best for our client. It also means having the best people working for us. Our clients rightly expect work of the highest quality – accurate, valuable, on time, on budget and with no surprises.

Community

We have a strong sense of doing what is right for the community and feel a responsibility to all people. We have a desire for a world that is peaceful, equitable and where people are honest with one another. We value spouses, children and family. We want everyone to have the opportunity to grow and be the best they can be, whatever this means for them.

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On-line Resources

The Australian Leadership Blog
www.theaustralianleadershipblog.com.au

The Benevolent Society/Social Leadership Australia
www.bensoc.org.au

Harvard Business Review
www.hbr.org

Human Synergetics
www.human-synergetics.com.au

The Leadership Sphere
www.theleadershipsphere.com

McKinsey Quarterly
www.mckinseyquarterly.com

Ted – a not-for-profit site dedicated to Ideas Worth Spreading
www.ted.com

University of Pennsylvania - Authentic Happiness
www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu

University of Pennsylvania - Positive Psychology Centre
www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu

Partners

Callahan Associates, Singapore
www.callahan-asc.com

Crossroads Human Resources
www.crossroadshr.com.au

Organizational Storytelling
www.onethousandandone.com.au

Teamscape
www.teamscape.com.au

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