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## An exploration of the iconography and lexicon of leadership

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### Key words

Leadership, leadership education, connote, iconography, lexicon, stereotypes, perception and misconception

### Abstract

*Leading business schools around the world are invariably keen to trumpet the achievements and contribution of their alumni. Captains of industry, entrepreneurs and prominent figures who have risen in both the public and private sector are lionised and held up as exemplars of what can be achieved if one possesses the right personality traits and of course the appropriate Executive MBA or comparable qualification. It has become popular in some quarters to compile power lists that furnish us with a veritable pantheon of achievers, individuals who are thought leaders, who affect change or whose weight of reputation can make financial markets nervous. Leadership manuals invariably reach for language and imagery more often associated with adventure and martial pursuits; with all the talk of scaling new heights, conquering peaks, reaching the top and doing battle with competitors. Leadership is portrayed as a quest for power, power to influence others, to make or destroy and make ones mark. At its most macho and unfettered there is almost a sense that leadership is all about the heel of insolent might. In reality really effective leadership is more nuanced, it needs to be more subtle and often benefits from a consensus approach.*

*In reality magnanimity is not a word one hears much in business schools or leadership programmes. Students of leadership, and management for that matter, are far more likely to here talk of victors and vanquished, of defeats and set-backs and of living to fight another day. To hear some tutors talk one would imagine that they would rather their students read Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* or Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* than anything by Joseph Schumpeter. This predilection that exists for martial metaphors may excite some males who wish to act out *The Game of Thrones* in their own careers, but can have a detrimental effect on organisations, institutions and in the board room, where a win at all cost attitude is actively promoted and encouraged. Little wonder then that many women feel alienated and shut out, for the iconography and language is such as to appear to reinforce existing stereotypes and societal expectations. Whilst there is a growing appreciation that effective leadership takes many different forms, the iconography and lexicon appears to have shifted very little. The alpha male big boys toys approach still prevails, with the 'spoils of victory' seen in a predictable light. Change if it is to begin starts with each of us, our judicious choice of language and imagery can begin to frame a different narrative. No one here is advocating revolution, but rather evolution and change by stealth. A subtle, sensitive and more thoughtful approach can help temper the macho and martial and might even lead some of us to appreciate that the corridors of responsibility are a welcome antidote to the current fixation that some have with the corridors of power.*

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