

## The Leadership Question (4)



# The Hitler Problem

What is 'leadership'?

Do people providing 'leadership' have to be 'good' people?

### What about 'The Hitler Problem'?

The problem Hitler posed for many ideas about 'leadership' is well, if unwittingly, raised by John W. Gardner, one of the prominent writers in the field of thinking about 'leadership' in business organisations (who refers to himself as writing on leadership for 25 years). In *On Leadership* (1990) he gives his definition:

"Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers."

So far, maybe, so good. This definition runs into some trouble, however, when Gardner later says:

"We say that we want effective leadership; but Hitler was effective. Criteria beyond effectiveness are needed."[\[1\]](#)

Thus, something more has to be added...but what? Gardner, like many other writers, does not have a clear and sustainable line of demarcation for the idea of 'leadership'. Peter Drucker too has the same dilemma: he wants his leaders 'doing good'.

We could say that there is a need for the aspiring leader to have good intentions, to be ethical, or be a nice person. But there is a tricky issue here when personal, subjective notions of the 'nice person', 'doing good', and 'effectiveness' is tied to conceptions of 'leadership' as such and are explicitly or implicitly used in definitions of 'leadership'.

One person's 'niceness' is another person's 'crassness'. Just consider the adulation and the loathing of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. This is what may be called 'The Hitler Problem' in the field of 'leadership' thinking.

To think about this problem, we can pose the question: was Hitler as a 'leader' in his time not 'effective' or is it that, when *History* judges, he is *later* assessed to have failed to deliver on one or more of his espoused goals, such as, creating a 'Thousand Year Reich' or 'exterminating all Jews in the world' or of 'ridding the world of Bolshevism', and so on?

Hitler at one stage was in fact widely regarded as the greatest of 'leaders' in Germany.

For example, Paul Ham considered Joachim Fest's assertion, that had Hitler been assassinated in 1938 most Germans would remember him as the greatest statesman of their country, as an "astounding remark" which failed "any objective test of 'greatness' *if the term means a just and enlightened leader*".<sup>[iii]</sup>

Note the conditional in the statement. While one with which many of us would concur, it nevertheless raises a difficult matter for thinking about 'leadership'.

And later, of course, when the Hitler regime collapsed and the brutality of its organisation was exposed, the murderous viciousness of the Nazi ideology had to be faced and Hitler then became a '*mis*-leader' in Drucker's phrase.

Hence, the problem for defining 'leadership'. Focusing on personal mannerisms and people being 'nice' and so on – however desirable otherwise – clearly misses something about 'leadership' as such.

How do you make sense of the Hitler problem?

Do you think 'leadership' can only be demonstrated by good people?

And how do you make sense of 'bad leaders' such as Hitler inspiring so many people to bring his vision into reality?

Our book **The Leadership Mind** by Connell Fanning and Assumpta O'Kane (2022) addresses this very important question of what is 'leadership' and solves 'The Hitler Problem'. It can be ordered on Amazon sites as paperback and Kindle; as eBook on all leading digital book platforms; and at good bookshops. For more information see [www.theleadershipmind.org](http://www.theleadershipmind.org) and [www.ucc.ie/en/keynes/](http://www.ucc.ie/en/keynes/). Sign up to our newsletter and keep up to date [eepurl.com/bp\\_AI5](http://eepurl.com/bp_AI5) with our work at The Keynes Centre.

**Connell Fanning** is the Founding Director of The Keynes Centre for supporting personal transformation and professional and organisational development for individuals and companies in all walks of life.

[i] John W. Gardner, *On Leadership*, The Free Press, New York, 1990, page *xiii*, 1, and 67.

[iii] Paul Ham, *Young Hitler: The Making of the Fuhrer*, Doubleday, London, 2017, page 238, emphasis added.

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