



ON BECOMING A BEYONDER

BY HERMAN VAN DEN BROECK AND DAVID VENTER



*Are you a “Beyonder” or are you confined to the drab mediocrity in which most leaders become bogged down? In their new book *Beyonders: Transcending Average Leadership* (LannooCampus, Leuven, 2011), Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School professors Herman Van den Broeck and David Venter explain how Beyonder leaders make a difference. This exclusive preview of their book focuses on the chapter “The Dance of Your Shadow.”*

One day, your grandchildren may ask, “Who were the great leaders when you were young?” Although history will probably confirm the names you mention, would you today be able to predict the really important leaders of the future?

Good leaders are a rare species. The happenings of 2011, from the Arab Spring to the bickering of European leaders over financial issues, pose serious questions as to the quality of those steering the ship today. Most leaders are anything but role models of excellent leadership. Would you include today’s politicians in your top 10 list of most admired leaders? We don’t think so! What about your boss: Is he or she someone who makes a positive difference? Then again, do you yourself make the difference you long for?

What we call “Beyondership” is the result of the interplay among seven distinct leadership characteristics: a deep-seated vision, a bias toward the positive, a tendency to support the blossoming of the new, the courage to be a minority of one, flow through passion and discipline, humble daring, and what we call the “dance of your shadow,” which we describe in detail in this article. As such, the Beyond model holds up seven mirrors in which you can reflect upon yourself and ponder how to improve your leadership skills.

Who Are Beyonders?

Beyonders are people who possess and radiate a deep-seated vision anchored in a clear set of values.

Their visions provide the beacons that guide their decisions, not short-sighted financial criteria. Beyonders think and act in an innovative and holistic manner.

THE DANCE OF YOUR SHADOW

In El Rocio Royal Nature Reserve in southern Spain, dozens of glistening, jet-black birds circle in the sunshine above a carcass. Against the backdrop of the clear blue sky, the birds execute a choreography that I am unable to follow. It is endless: They circle and circle, repeatedly drawing lines of glittering black ink across the cloudless heavens. Their shadows fall over the carcass.

The guide, Antonio, calls the birds by their Spanish name, a name I cannot repeat. Ravens, crows, rooks? “Who cares?” I think to myself. He gives us details of their wingspan, the length of their beak, the distance between their head and tail . . . These statistics are absorbing, but I am not interested in their barcode.

The dance of the birds above the carcass is enough to intrigue me (which is more than I can say for the smell). Antonio excites my curiosity further when he says that the birds are clearly hungry. “Then why don’t they start eating,” I wonder. “After all, it’s easy prey. . . .” My simplistic human brain spawns simplistic reasoning. “Be patient,” Antonio says. “It’s all about the dance.”

Ten minutes later, no fewer than 23 vultures descend on the carcass. With due respect for each other’s status, they approach the dead animal and commence their feast. Their powerful beaks make short work of the skin. “Those vultures have come from 70 kilometers away. I was expecting them,” Antonio says. “How did they know there was a carcass lying here?” I ask.

“It is because of the black birds,” he replies, using their Spanish name again. “Their dance is a display that can be seen from miles away, especially by hungry vultures. Their persistent, stubborn circling is a signal to the vultures to fly this way. When they have eaten their fill, they will leave. But more important, once the vultures are done, the black birds can start eating. The vultures tear the leathery skin open for them, and they then eat what is left.”

In spite of the smell, I stay for hours, just watching the show. The Dance of Your Shadow links the carcass, the black birds, the vultures, and countless other elements in their ecosystem. It allowed me to see the whole process from a new perspective!

TEAM TIP

As a group, look at the gap between intention and impact as an opportunity to learn.



What others see as obstacles, they welcome as opportunities. They choose and create environments that inspire passion and persevere until they have achieved their goals. Beyonders ask for second opinions, as they appreciate that yes-men do not contribute added value.

Beyonders exude creativity and are able to generate a myriad of ideas and solutions for any problem. They see opportunities that no one else has even considered. In stark contrast, average leaders merely perpetuate and protect that which worked in the past, shunning change. Beyonders never waste a good crisis! Even when they do not have the support of powerful parties within their organizations, they courageously fight for what they believe to be right.

During their various endeavors, Beyonders cast distinctive shadows that fall on others—shadows that tell a story of courage, commitment, perseverance, humility, integrity, reverence, optimism, and justice. By being aware of the “dance of their shadows”—the consequences of their decisions and actions over time—Beyonders ensure that their impact inspires others to discover their hidden qualities, thus helping them aspire to goals they never before considered (see “The Dance of Your Shadow”).

The Legacy We Wish to Leave

Recently, Francesco, a gifted former student, contacted me (David) to discuss his career. Francesco had completed his MBA studies 18 months earlier. Even before he had finished the course, he was asked to join one of the big consulting companies. As we talked, it soon became clear that he was going through a rough patch, anguishing about the ethics of the projects to which he had been assigned.

Some days earlier, the senior partner to whom Francesco reported met with him to gauge his progress. Francesco told the partner how well things were going, proudly stating that he was in the process of ensuring proper skills transfer to his clients. This announcement elicited a response of disbelief and horror. Did he not understand that this was totally contrary to company policy?!

Anguished by his young appointee’s naiveté, the senior partner proceeded to lecture him, using a patronizing analogy to underline his point. He asked Francesco what he would do if he were confronted with a group of people who needed water. Would he sell them bottles of water or would he sell them a water pump? When, without hesitation, Francesco replied “a pump,” he again received an admonishment. Didn’t he understand that it was company policy to keep clients dependant? Selling a pump went directly against this policy, whereas selling bottles of water would ensure that the client needed to return repeatedly for more support.

“This is not the legacy I wish to leave!”

Francesco stated during our discussion. The next day, he handed in his resignation—the most impor-

tant decision that he had made in his young life.

If you were in Francesco’s shoes, earning a good salary, what would you do? Would you leave, or would you stay?

Good Intentions Aren’t Enough

Life is largely about the consequences of what we do, not about our good intentions. All leaders aim for impact. But when you talk to them about their work, the discussion often degenerates into a paean to their own good intentions. Again and again, people tell us: “My intention was to increase the profitability of this firm” or “I wanted to motivate my staff” or “I did my utmost to convince the board to invest in new technology,” hoping that we will applaud their actions. But when all is said and done, these statements tell us nothing about the impact of their behavior! Confusing intentions with real impact can be misleading. Beyonders welcome the gap between intention and impact as an opportunity to learn. They don’t blame others when they fall short of their goals but rather look to improve their own execution and leadership.

So, how far does a leader’s responsibility stretch? The answer is complex and can best be illustrated through examples. First example: If you fight to secure your departmental budget, your team may regard your behavior as serving the whole, whereas your colleagues in other departments—who are also fighting for their own budgets—will probably think that you are being individualistic and selfish. What then is the dance of your shadow? In this case, the dance is multifaceted, being shaped by the reaction of both your team and your colleagues (see “A Greater Whole”).

Conclusion 1: Depending on the position you take, the same behavior can be interpreted as either holistic or individualistic.

Second example: I drive my children to school each morning. The road is too dangerous for young

A GREATER WHOLE

The Saerens family has been running a farmhouse hotel for years. In addition, they grow various crops, including rape. Rapeseed oil consists largely of unsaturated fats and is therefore very healthy. According to the Saerens, a rape field requires many bees to stimulate optimal production. Why? The rapeseed flower is large, with seeds that ripen from the bottom to the top. For a good harvest, all of the seeds must ripen at more or less the same time; otherwise, if the seeds at the bottom are ripe but the ones at the top aren’t, the ones at the bottom will fall uselessly to the ground. Bees stimulate the upper part of the flower to blossom sooner, causing all the seeds to become harvestable at roughly the same time. This is an interesting example of how smaller elements can contribute to the success of a far greater whole.



children of their age. At the same time, I am conscious that this decision means one more car on our already busy roads, which will probably influence other parents to drive their children. The dance of your shadow can be constructive, even fun, at the level of the particular elements within a given system, but at the same time can damage that system as a whole. In other words, you need to evaluate the quality of the dance at different levels (elements and system).

Conclusion 2: By optimizing your own position, you sometimes contribute to a reality that you do not really desire.

Third example: I feel sympathy for the people seeking asylum in my country. Even so, I am convinced that the structural problem of asylum seekers needs to be solved in their homelands and not here. Returning the asylum seekers to their own countries may be individually painful, but it may also be structurally necessary.

Conclusion 3: What for some people is a personal drama may for others be a correct structural decision.

Seeing the Invisible

The inescapable conclusion from these examples is that our world is inextricably interconnected, whether we like it or not. Although the elements that make up the world are mostly visible, the invisible relationships between these elements often determine the quality of the system in which we live.

Average leaders seldom go further in their thinking than their own self-interest. They are only concerned with direct, visible, and short-term effects. Consequently, they may damage the overall system in the long run, often aided (at least in the commercial world) by a one-sided bonus system that focuses exclusively on immediate profit. But what is the point of saving costs on raw materials when the quality of your final product is not up to scratch? The answer is obvious: No point at all. In organizations where everyone pursues actions that are individually beneficial, the situation gradually deteriorates over time, something often referred to as the “Tragedy of the Commons.”

To take the dance of your shadow seriously, you need to be aware of the so-called “superordinate goals.” If I play football, I want to enjoy the game, and I want my team to win. This is logical within the rules of the game and the structure of the competition. However, all teams have the further interest in ensuring that football remains an attractive sport for society as a whole; otherwise, sponsorships, the sale of television rights, gate receipts, etc. might be lost, thus killing the game. In other words, personal and superordinate objectives are closely correlated. Both are necessary to ensure the survival of football as a popular sport.

Beyonders take the dance of their shadow seriously. They do not want to risk destroying the entire structure by making short-sighted decisions. For this reason, when necessary, Beyonders deliberately compromise short-term interests (self-interest) for the sake of long-term objectives (the greater good).

Rewriting Ambition

While most of our thinking is short term, making us inclined to grab what we can now, numerous examples suggest that our chances of survival increase when we are not too greedy. It is in the shark’s interest to allow cleaner fish to hang around it; otherwise, its diseased teeth will soon drop out, it will no longer be able to catch its prey—and it will die of hunger as a consequence. Unfortunately, people are not always as clever as sharks!

But there is hope—sometimes we do learn from our mistakes. Following the 2008 financial crisis, political leaders desperately sought ways to limit excessive corporate salaries and bonuses, particularly in the financial services sector. This led to much soul-searching and eventually resulted in a series of new financial controls. One such control relates to the manner in which senior managers are paid. In many instances, they now receive only a percentage of the compensation due to them upfront, with the rest being deferred and earned through performance.

Still, many leaders aspire to “more, here and now” and “more than others.” This overemphasis on competition reinforces their fixation on short-term, measurable results. Seen in the context of this quick-fix mentality, it is little wonder that we have become “systems blind.” Unless we amend our definition of ambition, nothing much will change. Is it possible to—and do we dare—rewrite the definition of ambition to include people who incorporate the dance of their shadow into all aspects of their decisions?

Organizations today need Beyonders who are able to steer the ship and provide real answers, and not average leaders who merely fight for their turf. As Nelson Mandela was a Beyonder, so too you can become one in your organization. Being a Beyonder is not about being the best in the world, but being the best for the world. ■

Herman Van den Broeck is a professor at Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, University of Ghent. He is a specialist in change management, emotional intelligence, and leadership.

David Venter is a professor at Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School. He was born in South Africa and assisted Nelson Mandela in managing the transition from apartheid to democracy. He specializes in negotiation and mediation.

[See fables based on the book.](#)