Preface

The study of leadership has long occupied a central place in popular imagination. People want to understand the figures they admire (or despise), how and why they come to power, and what is the nature of the ideals leaders carry forward for the group. In the university, the study of leadership occupies the attention of scholars in many fields, especially history and political science, but also in psychology and psychoanalysis and increasingly as well as in more distant parts of the campus such as business schools. Interest in leadership, however, antedates the modern academy, as it can be truly said to have originated in the Bible, and with Plato and the Greek philosophers. This widespread and interdisciplinary concern has resulted in all kinds of overlapping studies that are sometimes descriptive and phenomenological and at other times more analytical and comparative.

Our contribution to this burgeoning field is to examine the psychology of leadership from a psychoanalytic point of view. The book spends a good deal of time noting the evolution of the ideas about leadership from the Greeks through Sigmund Freud and his followers to the extensive literature on the subject in the last half century. There is much to be gained by carefully studying this literature. Some studies, for example, such as Erik Erikson’s biographies of Martin Luther and Mohandas Gandhi, are exquisite in their intelligence, insight, and beauty of expression, although we may raise concerns about his theories. In fact, for the most part, we are more impressed with the limitations of most of the work done on the psychology of leadership in the twentieth century than with its enduring quality.

The problem, we suggest, is conceptual. In the early years of the century, writers stumbled about under the weight of Freudian drive theory on their shoulders. Ideas about sexuality and early conflicts had some relevance in the clinic but were especially cumbersome in dealing with leaders in the historical or political realms. There never seemed to be sufficient evidence to prove what observers were trying to argue. As psychological theory evolved, supple thinkers such Erikson, Robert Jay Lifton, and others found more creative approaches to understanding leaders in a variety of fields. Things began to open up intellectually.

However, no one in psychoanalysis made more of a contribution to the ideas that are relevant for understanding leadership than Heinz Kohut (1913–1981). Most of the important contemporary workers in the vineyard of psychoanalysis are children of Kohut. He refashioned the theory in ways that unlinked it from dependence on
stale ideas that have little relevance in the real world that leaders inhabit. He showed the depth of our subtle interdependencies with others in ways that can be described with actual leaders. He suggested ways of thinking about group behavior and the relation between leaders and followers. And, perhaps most of all, Kohut jettisoned drive theory, saving psychoanalysis from itself, and making it available for a profound understanding of the psychology of leadership without compromising the needs of scholarship for evidence that is available for others to locate, study, and replicate.

If that is the argument of the book, we try also to be ecumenical in our approach. There is nothing to be gained by narrow-mindedness, and no single thinker can possibly be said to solve all the conceptual complexities of the psychology of leadership. The discussion of the literature highlights much valuable early work that merits revisiting. Some of the studies, then, in the second part of the book—Thomas A. Kohut, for example—assume a Kohutian perspective, while others reflect the writer’s own concerns, as with Dan McAdams’s discussion of “narrative theory” in his analysis of George W. Bush. All, however, are attentive to larger issues of theory and meaning for future writers on the psychology of leadership.

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