



Leading Bond: Lessons from M as an Effective Leader

Introduction

I have always liked the Bond films. Great adventure, unfettered daring do, James Bond is a macho man for all seasons. Reflecting on this interest led me recently to read all the Ian Fleming novels. What I found was a difference between the books and the films that is striking. Beyond the running dialogue of adventure is an undercurrent of leadership and ethical stewardship between Bond and his boss M.

Who is “M” and what is his significance to the ability of James Bond to complete his “mission”?

Ian Fleming was a somewhat dysfunctional upper-class dilettante who worked for the Naval Intelligence during World War Two. He traveled greatly, saw much of the world controlled by colonial Britain just before that empire dissolved in the War’s aftermath. His experiences also provided an eclectic, loose militarized naval theme throughout all his books.

My concern in this essay is not a critique of Fleming but more an analysis of the portrait of Bond and M as character types. As the head of MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service, M was depicted as a retired Rear Admiral; taciturn, conservative, and thoroughly Victorian in his values...a product of the period between World War I and II. Some critics (Winder) see M as an encapsulation of faulty dystopian visions of British leadership in a post war world, in essence an analogue for understanding English elites’ absurd confrontation of the consequences of declining empire. For the purpose of this essay I choose to avoid this literary trap.

It is important to point out that throughout all his books, Fleming depicts him as a man caught in amber who provides the reader with a distinct image of the attributes of a “proper” leader. Frugal, a man of simple tastes, who exhibits a love of “club” (Blades), and an extremely “no-nonsense” attitude in his imposition of authority over all around him. M therefore presents the reader with a credible if somewhat flawed benchmark for assaying leadership traits. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to investigate a fictional version of leadership that fits well with theory and best practices of the field of study. Interestingly, Bond becomes a minor player, a “doppelganger” (a ghostly substitute) for the hero many men might wish to see themselves as representing, led by an idealized boss of great intellect and possessing well-grounded ethical values.

Interpreting Bond

A review of the literature surrounding the Bond character and the world he inhabits evokes consistent recurring themes. These include but are not limit to:

1. Business Practices – intelligence gathering, strategic planning, and anticipating competitive actions (Hoffman, 2006).
2. Globalization – the nefarious activities of non-governmental agencies (SPECTER “Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion”) and their villainies on an interconnected world (Earnest, 2000).
3. Marketing and Branding – selling products because Bond used them... Sea Island blue shirts to Rolex watches, Jersey butter to Norwegian honey, Bentley, Rolls Royce, BMW and even Ford Mustangs (Cathcart, 2006).
4. Gender/Sex/Race – masculinity, sexuality, homophobia, the white man’s burden, race, and socio-historic preconceptions of the cold war coupled to postmodern interpretation of social change in the aftermath of WWII (Bradshaw, 2010 and Kirkland, 2009).
5. National Image-Britain’s devolution as a nation-state in a post-colonial world where the small island becomes less important but still desires to retain its image of superiority/world power (Kirkland, 2009, Winder, 2007).
6. Story Telling – Umberto Eco’s “nine [thematic] moves” are woven into Fleming’s novels and they include (Eco, 1979):
 - a. M tasking Bond
 - b. Appearance of Villain
 - c. Bond/Villain check each other out
 - d. Woman appears
 - e. Bond possess woman
 - f. Villain captures Bond (and woman)
 - g. Bond tortured
 - h. Bond defeats villain (and is hurt)
 - i. Bond convalesces...new adventure...same recurring theme
7. Acting and Film – Interpretation of the Bond character by those who played him (Johnson, 2012).
8. Technology and Espionage – Inventions that emerge from film (Bond, Star Trek...radios, guns, technical innovation) (Sandham, 2008).

In summarizing how Bond has been interpreted in both academic and contemporary literature I found it interesting that all the obvious bases were covered. Generally, critiques followed the money and define Fleming’s views on power relationships in post war Britain. But all failed to see a new method of inquiry...how Bond was led. That is what I want to address next.

Critical Questions

What is my personal definition of “leadership”?

Through personal experience and career challenge individuals are forced to lead. How they lead is dependent on their skill set (leadership toolbox) and the personal, creative professional experiences the potential leader possess. Leadership application requires a continuum of awareness between those one leads and the needs of the organization. Balancing all these factors leads to a contextually bound personal perception of what leadership means. Leadership philosophy therefore is individually based and situational. How one leads is therefore a dynamic interaction between individual discernments, personal professional practices and theoretical knowledge.

Who is James Bond?

A British orphan, born of a British white father and a Swedish white mother (race biased attitudes seems important in many critiques of the genre and race based values run through Fleming’s writing). Educated at public (elite) schools, James Bond is a man who can define the best wines while contemplating killing his enemy. Thus Bond can be seen as a guided missile, an instrument of State policy, an agent of vengeance or a provocateur. Independent by nature, impulsive by inclination, and prone to take fools lightly, and addicted to self-destructive habits (drinking, smoking, and womanizing); Bond also could be thought of as the most difficult of employees to control. But surprisingly for M he is not! Why? He trusts his boss, M. He is loyal...to a fault...to his leader, his country, and his mission.

Who is his boss?

Portrayed in the films by both men and one woman M, as noted earlier, is hard on everyone. She/he demands the best out of his/her agency’s staff. He/she leads by example. M has earned his/her place as a leader.

What are the traits displayed by M, this fictional character? They include but are not limited to:

- a. **Judgment and knowledge.** Bond can never seem to best M in better understanding mission circumstances and he never really tries to do so. Bond defaults to M because he understands that M’s experience is an asset to him, not a hindrance. M has secrets he is not privy too.
- b. **Clarity of thought.** M is rarely perturbed by circumstances relating to a given activity. She/he listens, ponders, smokes his pipe or drinks her drink. Decisions are weighed carefully before action is taken. M is a critical thinker who is inquisitive, contemplative and intuitive. He/she is usually proved right. When proven wrong she/he admits error and uses that experience to improve the agency and rebuild trust with Bond.
- c. **Dependability and trust.** Again, Bond trusts M, M trusts Bond. They depend on each other. That element of trust is based on shared experiences (in the books both served in the Naval Services; in the films militarized service and other relational experiences are explored). Fleming provides countless examples of M and Bond’s shared values to duty, country, Queen.
- d. **Personal values.** Bond is much younger than M. But age differences seem to have little effect on their relationship. M and Bond both seem relatively impervious to money. They both like the “good life” of club and a social life. They seek decent company and stable friendships. Both value

initiative taking and reward it. Both are unselfish in giving and taking friendship with and from those they respect.

- e. **Mentorship.** Again, because M is older than Bond she/he becomes a mother/father figure to the orphan Bond (an underlying reason the Secret Service recruits orphans). This age related, generationally different relationship is depicted in both film and books as strengthening Bond's loyalty to M. Bond never wants to disappoint M. His striving to achieve can be interpreted as the actions of a dutiful son to a doting parent. They may seem to argue, but both M and Bond are family (along with Money Penny, Chief of Staff, and grumpy Q). In the end, one loves ones family and one fights to save them.
- f. **Flexibility.** M cannot micromanage Bond. You have to trust his instincts. M makes sure Bond is properly trained, supported, outfitted and cared for after returning from his mission in most cases a physically damaged person. Bond is a highly valued member of an elite group and he knows it. Bond is also treated with deference and respect by M.
- g. **Integrity.** M never lies to Bond. Bond may obscure intent in order to accomplish a given mission but he never lies to M. Both M and Bond exhibit tact, they never undercut each other.
- h. **Mission driven.** Bond is never sent out without guidance and intent. The mission may evolve over time, M may adjust it on the fly, but Bond relies on M to help him achieve his goals. When decisions need to be made both are decisive in action.
- i. **Bearing.** Both M (the male M's) and Bond are military men. Judi Dench plays a very martial woman. All conduct themselves with dignity and competence. All are mindful of his/her personal conduct.
- j. **Courage.** Bond and M (in all his/her incarnations) both exhibit physical and mental courage and moral fortitude during periods of stress.
- k. **Endurance.** M and Bond persevere. They endure pain and discomfort, humiliation and hardship; but their training and mental toughness win out in the end.

Bond and M are a team. They cannot achieve what their country wants to achieve without each other. Business leaders, non-profit executives and students of organizational effectiveness can learn much from analyzing the way in which both fictional characters are depicted relating to each other.

Summary and Conclusions

From the available literature, media products, and commercial interests the phenomena of "James Bond" is a continuing resounding success. Many millions of dollars have been generated by the franchise. More importantly individual fans and critics have devoted both time and effort into understanding fictional characters and the society that produced them. Business leaders even use Fleming's characters to espouse emulation.

In the end, inquiry into the behavior of Bond with his boss M is rich source of benchmarking information for the study of how to motivate high performing individuals. I have worked to show that Bond is Bond. *But he cannot be Bond without following the leadership of M.* The fictitious world represented in both books and film endures because those that read and view the stories want it to. But the "fiction" also provides a mirror we can use to discuss how we ourselves can better direct the organizations we lead.

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