Leadership in Organizations, Sociology of

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Abstract

This article updates an entry made in the first edition of the Encyclopedia (2001). It maintains the same structure by opening with a discussion on the definitional confusion among researchers of leadership – a confusion grounded in the fact that leadership can be looked at either a property (the position of the 'personalists') or a process (the position of their opponents, the 'situationists'). A number of influential leadership theories are examined, including theories that emphasize the importance of traits, behaviors, contingency, attribution, and symbolism. Charismatic and transformational leaderships are reviewed. Attention is given to the importance of the clinical paradigm in leadership research. Finally, we revisit developments in leadership studies since the first edition of the Encyclopedia a decade ago and propose emerging areas of research.

A Definitional Confusion

The Anglo-Saxon etymological origin of the words lead, leader, and leadership is *laed*, which stands for 'path' or 'road.' The verb *laeden* means 'to travel.' Thus a leader is one who shows fellow travelers the way by walking ahead. This metaphor of the leader as helmsman is still very much on the mark. Unfortunately, the clarity of leadership's etymology is rarely matched with clarity of meaning. When we plunge into the organizational literature on leadership, we quickly become lost in a labyrinth: there are endless definitions, countless articles, and never ending polemics. Papers, books, and articles claiming to delineate leadership proliferate, yet their conclusions can be confusing and even conflicting.

The most recent handbooks on leadership (Bass and Bass, 2008; Bryman et al., 2011) demonstrate the richness of leadership studies in their multiplicity of perspectives (social, psychological, historical, political, cultural, and even military) and approaches (theoretical, empirical, interdisciplinary, and policy-centered). Among the more popular are descriptions in terms of traits, behavior, relationships, and follower perceptions. Prevalent themes in the last decade include personality-based approaches, contingency theories, transformational leadership, leader-followership, innovation and creativity, the role of emotions, and the shadow side of leadership. More recently, with the financial crisis that began in 2008 and the poignancy of a number of high-profile corporate scandals, the nature and integrity of leadership practices have also come under the spotlight. The number of academic journals partially or fully devoted to the study of leadership continues to increase (*Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, to name a prominent few) reflecting the diverse and creative discourse on leadership study, as have the number of practitioner or commercial books on leadership, indicating popular interest in the subject.

We continue to see a continued movement away from laboratory experiments, observations of leaderless groups, or the activities of lower level supervisors toward what leaders at a higher level are doing in the context of their work environment. In *Harvard Business Review's 10 Must Reads on Leadership* (2011), all of which include case studies with CEOs and top executives, the opinion on what makes a great leader may vary, but the authors generally agree that leadership is not a gift inherent to a chosen few, but something which can be cultivated. This includes fine-tuning one's emotional intelligence, implementing key leadership behaviors, adopting effective strategies for adapting to crisis and leading through change, the ability to find meaning and to learn from extremely difficult events, and practicing authenticity.

While much progress has been made, the proliferation of studies has only generated more questions. The observations and profiles of actual leaders show a theatrical gamut of personalities, attributes, strengths, and weaknesses, with different contexts calling for different leadership styles. A review by Yammarino et al. (2005) cited in Crossan and Mazutis (2008) identified at minimum 17 different leadership theories, providing effectiveness remedies ranging from classical approaches to more contemporary forms such as charismatic and transformational leadership. However, this review precludes more recent streams of leadership studies in areas such as strategic leadership or shared leadership or more positive forms such as authentic, spiritual, ethical, or responsible leadership. While we continue to broaden our understanding on leadership, great leadership, while consisting of many teachable components, remains illusive.

A Proliferation of Theories

Broadly speaking, two extreme positions can be identified in leadership research. On one side of the spectrum are the 'personalists' – researchers who argue that specific personality variables determine leadership effectiveness. On the other side of the spectrum are the 'situationists' – those who deny the influence of individual differences and attribute all variations in leadership effectiveness to environmental constraints. While personalists view leaders as heroic helmsmen, in control of whatever situation they find themselves, situationists turn leaders into figureheads – puppets manipulated by the forces of the environment.

These opposing positions set the stage for a cornucopia of theories, each backed by strong defenders. We can find 'great man' theories, trait theories, situational theories, psychoanalytic theories, political theories, humanistic theories, cognitive theories, leader-role theories, reinforced change theories, path-goal theories, contingency theories, multiple linkage theories, vertical dyad linkage theories, exchange theories, behavioral theories, and attribution theories. This lack of apparent convergence has caused some scholars to abandon the subject altogether.

One of the problems in dealing with the subject of leadership is that it can be looked at as both a property and a process. As a property, leadership is seen as a set of characteristics – role behaviors and personality attributes – that make certain people more effective in attaining a set of goals. As a process, it is seen as an effort by a leader, drawing on various bases of power, to influence members of a group to direct their activities toward a common goal. Taking the property–process debate as a point of departure, let us turn first to the property perspective.

Order Out of Chaos

The trait theory (or great man theory) offered one of the earliest conceptual ways of looking at leadership. This theory holds that there is one best way to lead and that deeply seated personality variables allow certain people to master that best way. According to this theory, there are a number of universal characteristics of personality that determine a leader's effectiveness, without regard to behavior in a given situation. Because leadership is viewed as a set of relatively stable and enduring personal traits or physical properties, specific personality characteristics distinguish effective from ineffective leaders.

The initial search for these universal traits applicable to any setting was not overly successful, however. The results were conflicting, with methodological problems in research design cited as the major reason. Disappointed by the results of these studies, many scholars interested in leadership abandoned this line of research altogether, turning to other approaches to leadership. In the early 1990s, however, after a long hiatus in trait research (and with the help of better measuring techniques) a revival of trait theory was observed. Those studies went beyond the simplistic, atomistic approach of previous trait studies and identified a number of personality characteristics that consistently emerged, differentiating leaders from nonleaders – dimensions of character that can be mapped into the Big Five model of personality structure (Hogan et al., 1994). These various dimensions can be described in terms of surgency (a broad term that embraces competitiveness, achievement orientation, self-assuredness, and dominance), agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intelligence (including emotional intelligence). In addition, these studies regularly listed factors such as physical energy and extraversion.

Another group of leadership scholars espouses a behavioral theory. Distinguishing between the technical actions of a leader and the human actions, these behaviorists emphasize a set of observable role behaviors rather than traits. Like trait theorists with their individual characteristics, these scholars see certain role behaviors as being universal – that is, as producing leadership effectiveness regardless of the setting. Generally, however, the constructs employed by these scholars have been too rudimentary. This approach often looks at behaviors via dimensions such as consideration vs initiation, or task orientation vs relationship orientation (Bales, 1958). Another popular typology with a behavioral slant on leadership contrasts autocratic and democratic approaches (Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1958).

From this approach to leadership behavior, we move on the continuum to contingency theory. Instead of taking the position that leadership traits or behaviors are applicable to any situation, those supporting the contingency theory claim that the emergence of any one style is contingent on the environment in which the leader is operating. According to this point of view, the most effective leader is the one who is able to adapt his or her actions depending on the situation. In the model of one of the most prominent advocates of this point of view, the effectiveness of task- or relationship-oriented leaders depends on the favorableness of the situation as defined by the power of their position, the task structure, and the quality of the leader–member relationship (Fiedler, 1967).

The Importance of Attribution to Leadership

Another group of scholars espouses the attribution theory of leadership. According to these situationists, leadership is not a viable scientific construct; it is a mere label given to behavior. Only people's inferences about and reactions to leaders are viable (Calder, 1977). Because individuals have an inherent need to explain events that surround them, they assume that certain types of behaviors and actions can be attributed to the leader. Thus leadership is a perceptual issue, an illusion: individuals infer causation from observed behavior. The knowledge of the outcome causes individuals to attribute certain qualities to a leader.

This more situational point of view has been reinforced by a number of scholars of leadership who doubt whether leaders affect organizational performance. Advocates of this line of thinking contend that there are powerful external forces that shape organizational activities. Each leader is embedded in a social system – a system in which other actors not only have expectations regarding appropriate behavior but also make efforts to modify the leader's behavior – that places serious constraints on leader behavior. Leadership turns into a set of myths encouraging social construction of meaning, creating an illusionary causality (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

The symbolic role of leadership has been further explored by other leadership scholars (Meindl et al., 1985). In an extension of the attributional school of thought, these researchers call attention to the 'romanticized' conception of leadership. Ironically (given the attributional school's situational roots), these scholars suggest that leaders can play an important role through the manipulation of symbols in the management of meaning – activities that can be highly effective in influencing others. Using the vehicle of symbolism, many advocates of the situational point of view have been inching toward an interactionist approach to leadership

studies, positioning the leader/led relationship clearly at central stage.

Leadership as a Charismatic Process

Like the attributional school of thought, the contingency approach has also set the stage for a more relational slant on the study of leadership. Believing a leader cannot be studied meaningfully in isolation from his or her surroundings, this approach views leadership as an interactive process among the leader, the followers, and the situation. This orientation, transcending earlier, more naive approaches to leadership behavior, is an important step forward.

The problem with many relational theories in the past is that their point of convergence was too narrow. Dimensions such as initiation vs consideration, social orientation vs task orientation, and autocracy vs democracy are overly simplistic in describing leadership in its context. Furthermore, these earlier relational studies focused far too much on exclusive superior–subordinate relationships, ignoring (or slighting) the various constituencies of the leader: the industry environment, the national culture, and the culture that characterizes the organization.

This shortcoming has opened the door for a fresh look at charismatic leadership. Another impetus for this line of research has been the prevalence of a business climate of uncertainty and unpredictability – a breeding ground for the emergence of charismatic leadership. In our competitive, global world, where the transformation and revitalization of organizations holds a central position, the leader is increasingly seen as a crucial agent of change.

The new focus, then, is on the inspirational role of leaders. Researchers are turning to the study of leaders who by force of their personality have an extraordinary effect on their followers. The challenge for leaders of organizations becomes how to affect the mind-set of the organizational participants through value creation, through influencing the organization's culture, and through building commitment to the organization's mission, objectives, and strategies to obtain well-above-average organizational performance.

The first person to take up this new challenge was political scientist MacGregor Burns (Burns, 1978). In his writing, he makes a distinction between transactional and transformational leadership. While transactional leadership can best be viewed as a mundane contractual exchange based on self-interest (often described in the literature as the manager's role), transformational leadership seeks to satisfy the higher needs of followers – to engage in a process of mutual stimulation and elevation whereby followers will transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1998).

A number of researchers have built on Burns' notion of transformational leadership, using observed behavior of leaders to break the concept down into various components, in an effort to broaden early charismatic conceptualizations. For example, Bass and Avolio (1993), who view charisma as a subset of transformational leadership, list four behavioral components in the context of transformational leadership: (1) charisma or idealized influence, (2) inspiration, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individualized consideration. According to them,

charisma alone is insufficient to put in place a successful transformation process. Shamir et al. (1993) contend that charismatic leadership affects followers' self-concepts and has motivational consequences due to (1) changing follower perceptions of the task that has to be accomplished, (2) offering an attractive vision of the future, (3) creating a group identity, and (4) heightening individual and collective feelings of self-efficacy.

These various offshoots of a focus on the inspirational role of leadership contribute to a rich description of what the leadership mystique is all about. Researchers who view leadership as a charismatic or transformational process give proper attention to the contextual and cultural dimensions that are part and parcel of leadership dynamics. They are sensitive to the impact of the environment on leaders and on their behavior. Furthermore, they reject narrow instrumentalism in favor of a perspective whereby the leader is seen as the transformational agent of change. Other scholars have made the point, however, that the transactional role of leadership should not be ignored. They suggest that the most effective leaders take on two roles: a charismatic role (consisting of envisioning, empowering, and energizing) and an architectural role (designing the organization, setting up structures, and formulating control and reward systems (Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 1999)).

Some scholars of leadership argue, however, that in spite of the new, richer color given to leadership research, additional steps need to be taken to deepen our understanding of the leader's relational interchanges (Martin, 2007; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 2011). And the challenge is formidable. In spite of the various rational ways in which researchers attempt to deconstruct leadership and charisma, charismatic leadership is not rational in the traditional sense of the word. By its very nature, it is unstable, in that it exploits what can be interpreted as irrational processes. We need now to find ways to explore the forces that transcend rationality. Critics also argue that the study design of many researchers evaluating inspirational leaderships treats all leaders and all followers as amorphous, interchangeable groups of people; in other words, they fail to attend to differences in personality style. To rectify these shortcomings in leadership research, deeper insight into people's desires, wishes, and needs is needed, and that insight can be provided by a clinical focus.

The Clinical Paradigm

The clinical orientation to leadership research uses findings from psychoanalysis, cognitive theory, developmental psychology, and family systems theory to arrive at a richer understanding of personality and leadership. In the deconstruction of the dynamics of leadership, this orientation looks to the triangle of mental life consisting of emotion, cognition, and behavior. While in other approaches to leadership, the focus is generally on cognition and behavior, in the clinical approach emotions enter the equation. Research on how people alter has revealed that cognition alone does not create change; cognition needs to be complemented by emotion. The clinical paradigm also factors in unconscious processes. It presupposes that the personality of a top executive influences the strategy, corporate culture, and even structure of his or her

organization to such an extent that often organizations cannot perform successfully if no attention is given to a leader's intrapsychic world.

The clinical orientation toward the study of leadership has helped achieve greater understanding of the leader–follower interchange. Research into the dyadic relationships created by leaders (and acquiesced to by followers) suggests that failure in leadership can also be considered failure in 'followership': just as influence moves down from the leader to followers, so also does it move up. Understanding the impact of transferential processes such as 'mirroring' and 'idealizing' – processes characterized by confusion of time and place between the leader and the led – helps researchers clarify otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

The clinical paradigm, with its belief that every thought and action has a reason, sheds new light on irrational behavior in organizations. Processes such as projection, projective identification, splitting, collective regression, identification with the aggressor, *folie à deux*, the fear of success, scapegoating, narcissism, vindictiveness, and containment – along with other elements of the clinical paradigm – can help researchers better understand the leader–follower exchange. The clinical paradigm can provide insights into the dynamics of group behavior and the role of the leader; illuminate male–female differences in leadership through the analysis of fantasies around gender; and provide an understanding of the positive and negative effects leaders have on the corporate culture, structure, and decision-making processes (Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 2011). By looking at a leader's inner theater, scholars can better appreciate the reasons why that leader derails and his or her company fails.

Recent Developments

Although, at first step, venturing into the domain of leadership research may seem like walking on quicksand, this brief overview demonstrates the considerable advances that have been made over the last decades. Due to promising new research directions, especially those working toward a convergence of situationist and personalist positions, the prevailing attitude of disillusionment with leadership studies is experiencing a turnaround. After years of homogeneity in leadership research, the past two decades have seen a significant expansion in terms of theoretical frameworks and approaches. Most researchers of leadership now perceive the importance of a relational, interactionist point of view that looks at actual leaders in their 'natural' setting. Moreover, it is no longer difficult – given the rapid changes of our era – to convince researchers and practitioners of the relevance of the transformational side of leadership.

Since leadership is so closely tied to its context, the following represent a number of developments in the field as shaped by trends in contemporary organizational landscape:

1. *Cross-cultural leadership*: As global mergers, acquisitions, and strategic alliances become increasingly common, more attention needs to be given to the cross-cultural dimensions of leadership. When organizations join together in a partnership or merge to form a new company, it's very difficult to bring the strengths and values of both organizations together and to keep them alive in the new entity. Moreover, we have to take into account that leader effectiveness is contextual, and that success in one culture may not be successful in another. This is the reason why so many M&As fail. Hence, global or cross-cultural leadership is now becoming an important quality of a leader. Osland et al. (2006) define global leadership as "a process of influencing the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of a global community to work together synergistically toward a common vision and common goals" (p. 204). Such leaders are able to adjust to and lead effectively in different environments and to be able to communicate and work with diverse groups of people and partners. They have to be flexible and open to numerous diverse experiences. They have to have the acumen to decipher differences and idiosyncrasies of another culture and to know how to build off its strengths. However, questions remain as to what extent does effective leadership behavior vary from culture to culture, to identify the required competencies for leaders who run global organizations, and to foresee what are the future competencies he or she will need as organizations become more flexible, collaborative, and boundaryless (Martin, 2007).

2. *Shared, collective leadership*: The ability to create high-performance teams, in which leadership and decision making is shared, is also essential in present-day organizations. Leaders are confronted with new configurations such as virtual team leadership, distributed shared team leadership, and leadership within multiteam systems. In many organizations, teams have replaced executives acting independently and many teams exist for the specific purpose of handling what used to be traditional executive functions. Moreover, leadership is increasingly structured as a constellation of different individuals possessing different, but complementary roles (Kets de Vries, 2008). As such, team leadership requires people who have a solid dose of emotional intelligence who can get the best out of people; who unite their constituents around a common cause, and connect with them as human beings; and who help their people perform beyond expectations. Such leaders need to be able to create collaborative, cooperative teams of people who work together to prioritize activities and apply the organization's resources to reaching desired goals (Martin, 2007). While leading in a team can be one of the most fulfilling experiences of ones professional life, conversely it can also be one of the most frustrating and demotivating. Nothing is worse than being part of a dysfunctional, conflict-ridden team. Managing the darker side of team dynamics is also an important role of a leader (Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 2011; Rosenbach et al., 2012). Questions remain as to how to capitalize on the synergy from diverse teams, how to create a shared reality among different members, and what can be done to 'stretch' and get the best out of the people in the team, and how a culture of shared leadership can be created throughout the organization?

3. *Moral leadership*: With the prevalence of corporate scandals in the last decade, governance issues are also taking the spotlight, with themes such as responsibility,

accountability, and ethical and socially responsible leadership. Corporate governance refers to the set of systems, principles, and processes by which a company is governed. They provide the guidelines as to how the company can be directed or controlled such that it can fulfill its goals and objectives in a manner that adds to the value of the company and is also beneficial for all stakeholders in the long term. But governance is part of the bigger issue of moral leadership, and one which attaches itself to the integrity and credibility of the leader and how he or she serves as the symbols to express the values that hold the society or organization together (Gardner, 1965). These are the enlightened and responsible leaders who are able to lift "people out of the petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear a society apart and unite them in the pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts" (Gardner, 1965: p. 295). However, critical questions remain as to how society or organizations are developing current and future leaders to essentially rise above the collective and to take on the bigger questions of what the society or organization they are leading stands for, where they are heading, where they want to go, and what are the major forces and trends determining their future and to have the conviction, confidence, and courage to assume that role.

Emerging Areas of Research

Although leadership research has come a long way, more work needs to be done. One key factor in the selection of topics that require further investigation should be relevance of a topic to leadership's various constituencies. But 'relevance' needs to be broadly construed: the subject of leadership should be seen as applicable not only to a few highly exceptional individuals at the top of the organization but to a much broader audience.

Because of the challenges growing out of the exponential rate of change in this age of transformation, a number of issues feature prominently on the research agenda of the future.

1. *Adaptive leadership*: Organizations are now facing challenges at a rate unprecedented to previous times, with companies having to operate on a global level, keeping up with shifting competition bases, increased accountability from stakeholders, and the need for innovation and reinvention in order to stay ahead of the game. Leaders have to learn new ways of operating and mobilize their people throughout the organization to change its mind-set and behaviors in order to thrive in new business environments (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997). Leaders have the challenge of breaking long-standing behavioral patterns of their own, provide leadership that involves others, and to help organizational members to change their own behavior, while also managing the stress and uncertainty of change. They have to be able to create an environment in order to allow people to collaborate and work more interdependently, to build important relationships across boundaries, to lead with a more flexible style, and to be open and adaptable to new ideas (Martin, 2007). However, how does one go about to create a cultural change within the organization, and given

the increased reliance of organizations on creativity and innovation, what can leaders do to stimulate and sustain this process?

2. *Authentic leadership*: Authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy "know thyself" (Plato) and has seen variations over time "to thine own self be true" (Shakespeare). To guide others effectively, leaders must know themselves, who they are, and why they do what they do and to live up to their values. Authenticity suggests that individuals need to have a complete view of themselves and this includes taking into account both their strengths and weaknesses. Those who fail to consider their irrational and dark sides are like captains who blindly plow their ships into a field of icebergs: the greatest danger is hidden below the surface. Avolio et al. (2004) define authentic leaders as those who are "deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/ moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character" (p. 4). In confronting, with honesty, ones inner theatre, an individual is then free to discover and express his or her true self. Moreover, authenticity reflects back onto others. Through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modeling, authentic leaders can foster the development of authenticity in followers and provide them with a sense of purpose and self-determination. In turn, followers' authenticity contributes to their well-being and the attainment of sustainable and veritable performance (George et al., 2007). However, the link between authentic leadership and sustained organizational performance needs to be clarified. A leader may be authentic in his or her actions, but this might not necessarily lead to better organizational performance, nor be transmitted to followers. What are the factors which facilitate this transmission? In what ways can authenticity have a positive effect on organizational performance and can these positive effects be transmitted to followers? Another interesting issue is the mitigating role of culture on the transmission of authentic behavior from leaders to followers all across the organization. Links can also be made to help executives, through group coaching sessions, to ask the basic questions of who they are, what they believe in, and why they do what they do and in doing so, discover their authentic side. Group coaching has proven to be highly effective in creating authentizotic organizations, places where people are authentic, feel at their best – and give their best (Kets de Vries, 2001).

3. *Group coaching for leadership development*: Leadership coaching, which most commonly takes the form of one-on-one interactions between an executive and a coach, has changed the way many progressive organizations view professional and personal growth and development. It is a specific form of intervention that can be carried out strategically with individuals, teams, or an entire organization. While one-on-one coaching certainly has its benefits, leadership group (or team) coaching – in essence, an experiential training ground for learning to function as a high-performing team – is a great antidote to organizational silo formation and thinking, and a very effective way to help leaders become

more adept at sensing the hidden psychodynamic under-currents that influence team behavior. Its aim is to direct a group of people toward a specific, mutually determined goal and to accelerate organizational performance by providing focus and awareness; it fosters strategic agility. Leadership group coaching sessions provide a safe space for honest and open explorations and confrontations wherein teams challenge and reassess their assumptions about themselves and others and in doing so, understand why they behave the way they do and why the team as a whole behaves the way it does. They undergo a cohesive experi-ence, bringing the team closer together, not only in terms of resolving conflict and achieving mutual understanding, but also increasing shared accountability and renewed commitment (Kets de Vries et al., 2007). When instilled as part of its leadership development culture, team-oriented coaching cultures are like networked webs in the organization, connecting people laterally in the same departments, across departments, between teams, and up and down the hierarchy. However, more attention has to be paid to differentiating the quality and effects of the many leadership coaching programs currently available to determine those that have viable effects on sustained organizational performance and to measure such effects once executives take it out of the group coaching sessions and into their organizational life.

Leaders fulfill many different roles in people's imagination. They are catalysts of change; they are symbols; they are objects of identification; and they are scapegoats when things go wrong. Leaders are also prone to hubris. As Napoleon (an expert on the topic of hubris as well as leadership) once said, "Glory is fleeting, but obscurity lasts forever." All leaders are susceptible to the darker sides of power. The most effective leaders, however, are the ones who know how to balance action with reflection by using self-insight as a restraining force when the sirens of power are beckoning.

> *See also:* Bureaucracy and Bureaucratization; Bureaucratization and Bureaucracy, History of; Charisma and Charismatic; Charisma, Social Aspects of; Corporate Governance; Elites: Sociological Aspects; Leadership; Organizational Behavior, Psychology of; Organizational Climate; Organizational Decision Making; Organizations and the Law; People in Organizations; Weber, Max (1864–1920).

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