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Leadership Theory: Past, Present, and Future Directions

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by

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Introduction

Why is a discussion of leadership theory important to an audience of professional businessmen? Simply, I feel, because leadership is something they are expected to provide every day, whether they know what it is or not. Indeed, if businessmen do not know what leadership is in theory, can they really be expected to fulfill their leadership responsibilities properly in our society? I feel they cannot. And from this comes the purpose of this paper: to explain and clarify the current status of leadership theory in terms understandable to the businessman.

My orientation here is deliberately theoretical rather than pragmatic. I feel that when a person understands the theory behind a phenomenon, he will be able to apply that phenomenon to attain his goals much more effectively than if he has simply memorized a few basic maxims to serve as guides to action. Certainly leadership cannot be learned exclusively from a textbook. But we will make little progress in improving leadership practices if we don't have a sound theory from which to develop basic principles.
Functions of Leadership Theory

To begin this discussion, I will formulate working definitions of the concepts of leadership and theory, starting with "theory", which is the easier term to define. A theory seeks to explain the relationship among a set of two or more variables. A variable may be considered a symbol which stands for some phenomenon (e.g., pressure or temperature in the physical sciences). We can view theory construction as an attempt to explain a wide range of observable facts by means of a much smaller set of relationships from which the observed facts can be deduced. Useful theory becomes a kind of scientific shorthand which allows us to understand the relationships among a set of variables so that we may predict future behavior in a wide range of contexts.

While man has recognized the need for leadership for many centuries in all walks of life, he has had a difficult time coming up with a usable (and nontrivial) definition to describe leadership. For example, here are three straightforward definitions which have been proposed:

--To get someone else to do what you want done (the "highschool boy's" definition)

--The exercise of authority and the making of decisions

--The process of influencing group activities toward goal setting and goal achievement.

For reasons that will be made clear later, I am personally attracted to the Navy definition, which includes the idea of moral responsibility for actions:
Leadership is the art of accomplishing a mission through people. It is the sum total of those qualities of intellect, of human understanding and of moral character that enable a man to inspire and manage a group of people successfully. Effective leadership, therefore, is based on personal example, good management practices, and moral responsibility.

These definitions cover a broad range, from a basis of pure power relationships to a basis of position in the organizational hierarchy. Yet we have just noted that formulating a theory requires that we ultimately specify relationships between certain selected variables. If we are unable to agree on a definition of what leadership is or even on what variables it encompasses, then we will not be surprised to find that the development of leadership theory has progressed slowly.

Indeed, the task of leadership theory is to develop a set of concepts that will permit the analysis and description of leadership situations. The concepts, to be scientifically useful, must be operational; their meanings must correspond to empirically observable facts or situations. At this point, it is important to differentiate leadership theory from leadership techniques. The latter represent attempts to develop styles of leadership that work, while the former is an attempt to understand the phenomenon in scientific terms. The two approaches complement each other; indeed, the two are often developed hand in hand. Yet many books on leadership spend only a few brief paragraphs on leadership theory per se and devote the remainder to prescribing ways to improve leadership style. While such books may be of use to the businessman as a practicing manager, they are of little
help in developing and testing leadership theory and will be excluded in this analysis.

Indeed, the requirement of empirical and factual observation also raises difficulty with the U.S. Navy definition above. Value judgments (e.g., What constitutes moral responsibility?) are not amenable to analysis by the scientific method. For this reason, the Navy definition is too broad to be used as the basis of a scientific theory of leadership. It does bring to light important if intangible qualities, and it is an appropriate ideal to guide the person in a position of leadership. The issue of moral responsibility is very important in leadership. But before it can be fruitfully analyzed, it is necessary to differentiate leadership from management and to trace the development of the field of leadership theory.

**Leadership and management: Are they the same?**

The study of leadership is filled with semantic difficulties. One of the most severe concerns differentiating leadership from management (or vice-versa). How do we know we are looking at leadership behavior, and not simply describing the functions of a manager or executive? Can we specify the element that differentiates a leader from an executive or manager? I feel we can. The key comes from the dictionary definition of leader which means, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, not just "to be at the head of," but also "to show the way by going before or along with."

Whereas management is working with and through people in an
effort to accomplish established organizational goals, 3 leadership is concerned with influencing one or more members of a group by "showing the way." We thus see that leadership is a broader phenomenon, which can occur outside the context of the organization, while management always occurs inside.

Jennings states the essential difference very well in less theoretical terms:

Leadership is the leaving of a mark. It is initiating, beginning; it is born of deliberation and thought. There is change from the expected. The result is a new character or direction that otherwise would not have occurred. The leader is contrasted to the executive who brings about changes in character or direction that are ready to be made and which are apt to occur anyway . . . . The leader has more personal thrust. People are inclined to say things would not have been the same without his presence. This is seldom said about the executive. More than likely it is said of him that he accomplished what was necessary and expected and what the situation logically warranted. The leader always goes immeasurably beyond the formal requirements or expectations. 4

Leadership, then, has to do with change and the setting of new goals. Management is concerned with keeping the present organizational design running smoothly. The businessman acts as a manager when he attends to his day-to-day activities. He becomes a leader when he evaluates a new situation and sets the direction for his subordinates to take.

But early developments in the field did not always make this distinction, as we shall see when we review the three main theories in vogue prior to World War II.
Development of the Field of Leadership Theory

Traditional theories of leadership developed along three lines: leadership as a function of the traits within the individual; as a function of the situation; or as a function of the group. As we review each of these theories, note first how each attempts to show that the best method of leadership is the function of a few variables. Then note that each theory eventually reaches an impasse when tested empirically. Analysis of experimental data fails to differentiate effective from ineffective leadership.

The trait theory of leadership is based on the assumption that leadership resides within the individual and that an individual endowed with the proper traits can bring leadership to any group. There can be little doubt that to function as a leader a person must possess certain qualities and capacities for achievement which interrelate with what others bring to the group. The following is a good example of the influence that a trait can have on a group:

The last and best picture of Grant is on the evening after he had taken his first beating from General Lee in the campaign against Richmond. He was new with the Army of the Potomac. His predecessors, after being whipped by Lee, had invariably retreated to a safe distance. But this time, as the defeated Army took the road of retreat out of the Wilderness, its columns got only as far as the Chancellor'sville House crossroad. There the soldiers saw a squat, bearded man sitting on horseback, and drawing on a cigar. As the head of each column came abreast of him, he silently motioned to it to take the right-hand-fork back toward Lee's flank and deeper than ever into the Wilderness. That night, for the first time, the Army sensed an electric change in the air over Virginia. It had a man.
Research to support the trait theory is centered on identifying a unique set of characteristics that make a person a successful leader. For example, writing over sixty years ago, Michels included a force of will, relatively wide knowledge, strength of conviction, and self-sufficiency in his list of suggested traits. The search for these desired characteristics leads to the "great man" theory of leadership, where certain individuals who possess superior traits are supposed to influence the course of history by their deeds (e.g., Napoleon, Bismark, de Gaulle). However, none of the many attempts to isolate traits proved successful or generalizable to other situations. Interest in identifying a set of traits that characterized the leader gradually gave way by the end of World War II to interest in considering leadership a function of the situation.

The situationalist approach perceives leadership to be a direct function of the situation, culture, context, and customs of the group just as much as it is a function of personal attributes and group requirements. A crisis, for example, creates an immediate need for leadership, for someone to take command. In this situation, the leader is the individual who has the ability when the chips are down to assume the leadership role.

The emphasis is on observed behavior and not on innate qualities. This makes the situationist approach more appealing than the trait approach, because it opens the possibility that leadership can be taught. Under trait theory,
a person who lacked the innate characteristics that would make him a leader is relegated to the ranks of followers all his life. In contrast, under the situationalist approach, leadership techniques appropriate to particular situations can be taught. If leadership can be learned, then there is hope that each person can become a leader if he works hard and undergoes proper instruction. If people can learn to be leaders, then there is hope that some of us who were born without one or more traits associated with leadership could still become leaders, although the attainment might take considerable training and practice.

The difficulty with the situationalist approach to leadership in terms of developing theory is that it treats each situation as unique. Drawing on this premise, a school of thought developed which postulated that man was essentially helpless in light of the greater scheme of things. The study of leadership becomes meaningless in this context, because the leader cannot change the course of events anyway. Formulations of this sort arouse great interest, especially when contrasted with the activist assumptions of the trait theory. However, their statements are so general (e.g., man's behavior is linked with cosmic forces) that they preclude the development of testable hypotheses necessary for the construction of a useful theory of leadership.

The third theory postulates that leadership is a function of the group; that is, it reflects the interrelation
of individuals. In a sense, this theory is an offshoot of the situationalist approach. However, in this case, the theorists speak of the leadership structure of the group and not of the leader(s) of the group per se. The group must perform many different functions to formulate and achieve its goals while at the same time maintaining itself as a well-integrated and effective entity. These functions get lodged with different persons in terms of how individuals and the group perceive the needs of the group and the usefulness of the individual members at different times. The man who represents the group often is most closely aligned by his personal attitudes and beliefs to the desires of the group as a whole and reflects their weaknesses in his.

The issue of which of these theories is correct is seen to be an empty one when examples are presented which illustrate all three theories at once. Consider a flock of birds in flight in the common V formation. Leadership patterns in birds and animals seem to be just as complex and difficult to understand as they are in humans, and they reflect many of the same problems and qualities. For example, the lead bird must have great physical strength to break through the air and provide the initial thrust, creating turbulence in its wake. The lead bird's position is thus determined to some extent by its physical characteristics. The birds that follow in the formation are apparently able to deploy themselves to make maximum use of the turbulence created by the lead bird. Their positions relative to each other are thus determined by group interaction. If the lead bird gets too
tired, or the formation changes course, a substitution in leader is made. Hence, the bird in the lead position may be there largely as a result of the direction of the situation.9

Now consider Winston Churchill. Although not a very successful leader either before or after World War II, he is widely acclaimed for his inspirational leadership during the war. Was his success in rallying the British against the Germans due to traits such as indomitable will? Or did the situation create the opportunity where Churchill could utilize his skills to inspire people? Or did he perform special functions of inspiring England as one member of a group of people who were guiding the British war effort? About all people can agree on is that Churchill was a leader during the war; there is no consensus on why he was a leader.

From these examples we see that the leader undoubtedly has some special traits or characteristics which distinguish him from the other members of a group, regardless of its tasks or structure. Similarly, the task on which the group is engaged certainly affects the type of leader chosen and the behavior of that leader. Furthermore, one or more persons may perform leadership functions, in the sense that many in the group may contribute to achievement of its goal, and thus leadership is, to this extent, a group property.

To be useful, theory should be elegant: it should use a few concepts or relationships to explain a wide range
of phenomena. Here we have used three theories to explain the actions of a flock of birds and of one man—hardly an economical way to proceed! Nevertheless the examples show us that leadership must be considered a shifting and dynamic concept. It cannot be satisfactorily explained by a static, unitary approach which stresses only the group, the situation, or the individual.\textsuperscript{10} We arrive here at an important transition in the analysis of leadership. Increasingly, the study of leadership is being focused on a system of relationships rather than solely on the leader's attributes and actions. Let us look at modern research in the field and see where it is taking us.

\textbf{Modern Developments in Leadership Theory}

Modern research to determine the style of leadership which would maximize organizational effectiveness dates from 1945 when the Ohio State University leadership studies were begun. These were the first concerted investigations into leadership phenomena by behavioral scientists. Prior to this, research had concentrated on determining where the one best style of leadership was located along a continuum of styles which extended from highly autocratic to democratic (participative) to laissez-faire.

The Ohio State studies attempted to discover precisely how leaders differ in their leadership styles.\textsuperscript{11} The researchers studied leadership in organizations varying from factory work groups to submarine crews. Analysis of the
data yielded two basic, separate dimensions, which have subsequently been found in studies of a wide variety of organizations: (1) "initiating structure"—how the leader organizes the task for his subordinates; and (2) "consideration"—the style of supervision used by the leader. These researchers found that supervisors tended to rate subordinates on the basis of the type of initiating structure they used, while subordinates tended to rate their superior's proficiency on the basis of both consideration and initiating structure. The overall pattern of findings led to the conclusion that the leader who is likely to satisfy both his superior and his subordinates will be above average on both initiating structure and consideration.

Researchers at The University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research studied behavior of work supervisors in an attempt to find out what differed between the high- and low-performance supervisors. The pattern of results in these studies suggested a general principle underlying the behavior of the effective supervisors. Rensis Likert, one of the founders of the Institute for Social Research, calls this the "principle of supportive relationships."

The leadership and other processes of the organization must be such as to ensure a maximum probability that in all interactions and all relationships within the organization each member will, in the light of his background, values, and expectations, view the experience as supportive and one which builds and maintains his sense of personal worth and importance. This principle is consistent with what the Ohio State researchers called consideration.
The Michigan research also suggested that in addition to being supportive, the effective supervisor differentiates his role from that of the worker; he plans, regulates, and coordinates the activities of his subordinates but does not engage directly in the production tasks of the work groups. These basic supervisory functions encompass much of what is meant by "initiating structure." While the effective supervisor emphasizes his human relations function, he does not abdicate his formal role of supervision.

An attempt to specify leadership behavior

It is also possible to view leadership as a set of specific acts rather than as a group process. For example, Bass makes a conscientious attempt to define concisely and precisely the variables and relationships he uses. When defining leadership, he stays away from broad generalizations (such as we have seen above) and concentrates on specifying the elements that constitute a leadership act. He identifies three explicit forms of leadership behavior:

Attempted leadership:

A. observed trying to change the behavior of B. (Jim tries to get John to work for company XYZ.)

Successful leadership:

A. changes B.'s behavior. (John goes to work for company XYZ.)

Effective leadership:

The change results in B.'s satisfaction. (John is glad he went to work for company XYZ.)
From this, we see that Bass considers leadership primarily as a group influence process. A group is defined as two or more people who come into purposeful (goal-seeking) contact with each other on a continuing basis. Influence is defined as the changing of B. by A. without A.'s and B.'s necessarily being members of the same group (e.g., A. hears a weather forecast by B. and decides not to go on a picnic because the forecast is for rain). Bass then proceeds to use variables descriptive of group activity (e.g., influence, power, satisfaction) as criteria for evaluating leadership behavior.

For Bass, leadership behavior may take two forms: (a) changing the goal of the other person; or (b) initiating means for the other person to cope with his needs. It is interesting to note that most teaching activity is included under this second heading. Indeed, O. Tead, writing in 1935, concurred strongly; he labelled one chapter in his book on leadership "The Leader as Teacher" and stated in it: "The good leader, one has to conclude, is a good teacher."

Bass's step toward bringing measurability to the study of leadership is commendable. In attempting to define leadership in terms that are empirically testable, however, he has excluded from leadership theory such qualities as human understanding, judgment, and moral responsibility. There have also been attempts to expand the scope of leadership theory by means of what are called "contingency models,"
so that effectiveness of the organization becomes the criterion of success. We shall discuss them next.

**Contingency models**

In the last decade several leadership theorists advocated considering leadership as an element which needs to be adapted to the rest of the situation to provide effective results. Before we were looking for the elements which constitute the one best style of leadership; this style of leadership was assumed to be best for any situation. Now we are looking for a set of leadership strategies. Each one of these strategies will be most effective under a specific set of conditions, but no one strategy will be most effective under all conditions.

The most work in developing such a "contingency model" of leadership has been done by F. Fiedler. He postulates that three major situational variables determine whether a given situation is favorable or unfavorable to a leader:

1. His personal relations with the members of his group (leader-member relations)

2. The degree of structure in the task which the group has been assigned to perform (task authority)

3. The power and authority which his position provides (position power)

To Fiedler, the favorableness of a situation is the degree to which the situation enables the leader to exert his influence over his group to get his group to attain the goal he has set for it.
In this model eight possible combinations of these three situational variables can occur. As a leadership situation varies from high to low on these variables, it will fall into one of the eight combinations (situations). The most favorable situation for a leader to influence his group is one in which he is well-liked by the members (good leader-member relations), has a powerful position (high position power), and is directing a well-defined job (high task structure): for example, a well-liked Admiral making an inspection of a Navy ship. On the other hand, the most unfavorable situation is one in which the leader is disliked, has little position power, and faces an unstructured task: an unpopular chairman of a voluntary hospital fund-raising committee.

Fiedler reexamined old leadership studies in light of his contingency model and concluded that:

1. Task-oriented leaders tend to perform best (to be most effective) in group situations which are either very favorable or very unfavorable to the leader.

2. Relations-oriented leaders tend to perform best (to be most effective) in situations which are intermediate in favorableness.

Fiedler's model raises several interesting questions. First, is it more useful as a normative guide to the practicing manager than it is to the development of theory? While much of Fiedler's data points in the proper direction to substantiate his hypotheses, very little of it is statistically significant. Second, is Fiedler's model too static? Can it handle changing
situations? Earlier we saw that leadership is a dynamic, changing concept. Yet here we have a model that is essentially static in nature. One rejoinder would be that change is not nearly so rapid as we sometimes think it is, and thus for substantial intervals of time most situations can be considered as relatively stable. But since management--and not leadership--is concerned with the static situation, might this not be a managerial rather than a leadership model?

The most interesting aspect of his model is the implication that it is effectiveness we should be worried about, and not leadership per se. For Fiedler leadership is a much broader concept than it is for Bass. He defines the leader as "the individual in the group given the task of directing and coordinating task-relevant group activities or who, in the absence of a designated leader, carries the primary responsibility for performing these functions in the group." I see this as being very nearly synonomous with management as I have previously defined it. Thus, while Fiedler's work may have relationships and concepts which can be built into a theory, it will not be a theory of leadership as we have defined it but rather a theory of managerial effectiveness. Leadership has become only one of several ingredients in the process of getting a group to perform effectively.

Present Leadership Theory

At present I see the field of leadership theory characterized by forces pulling it in diverse directions and as bedeviled as ever by inadequate acceptance of definitions
of fundamental concepts. The term leadership itself seems to be subject to as many different definitions as there are people who attempt to define it!

In addition to the definitional problems, theorists have had difficulty attempting to construct a set of concepts which can (1) be tested and replicated in the field, but (2) do not overly restrict the phenomena under study. In many ways this situation is reminiscent of the difficulties with the trait theory of leadership, which reached a standstill before World War II because of its proponents' inability to isolate traits whose usefulness could be accurately projected to different situations. I see the recent (1960) work by Bass as a constructive attempt to define the elements of a theory of leadership based on influence. Well-planned and thorough research efforts such as the ones by the Michigan and Ohio State leadership groups and by Fiedler are helpful in defining the scope of predictive powers of current theories of leadership. While the results of these efforts have not been entirely consistent with the basic hypotheses of the theories they were to test, they do provide operating guidelines for the practicing manager which are based on something more than intuition. Such work also provides a basis for reformulation of the fundamental concepts of leadership theory in accordance with empirical observation of the success or failure of influence attempts.
I see Fiedler's contingency model gaining in popularity in the future. To me, however, it represents a shift from attempting to understand leadership per se to regarding leadership as one of several factors which, taken together, determine effectiveness. The problem with this shift is that it emphasizes effectiveness, which is a different concept from leadership. Effectiveness is a measure of managerial success, whereas leadership, which we are interested in, concerns relationships between people. Viewed in this context, the Ohio State and Michigan studies also appear as attempts to identify effective styles of management rather than attempts to elucidate the true nature of leadership.

Future directions

But criticism is of little value unless it can be used to improve a situation. At this point, therefore, I will offer an analysis of where the field of leadership theory should go in the future.

Let us now consider the dilemma for leadership theory mentioned at the beginning. It has to do with the concept of moral responsibility inherent in the Navy definition of leadership. By any of the standards we have postulated, an Adolph Hitler and a Douglas MacArthur fare equally well. Yet Hitler sought to subjugate and destroy the world while MacArthur devoted his energies to defeating a totalitarian Japanese government and later to rebuilding a devastated Japan. Our problem here is whether to include moral responsibility in the definition of leadership. Most definitions make
no explicit mention of the need to consider moral responsibility. Indeed, these definitions of leadership (page 2) are based on the influence process and leave moral judgments out altogether, undoubtedly in order to facilitate the construction of theory, which demands factual rather than value-laden relationships.

Yet leadership in the popular image often requires the element of moral responsibility. For example, Lieutenant Calley is considered by many to have acted erroneously when he carried out his orders to the letter in the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam in 1968 rather than overriding them with his own judgment. Critics of his action maintain he should have invoked a higher sense of moral responsibility, which would have precluded his murdering innocent women and children in a situation where his men were in no danger.

Thus leadership in some instances is clearly a normative issue. What goals should the leader be setting for his followers? One way out of the difficulty is to modify the concept of leadership with an adjective to specify the type of leadership intended. We would thus have categories such as "group" leadership, "managerial" leadership and "moral" leadership. The group concept of leadership would deal exclusively with the influence process (e.g., Bass). The managerial concept would deal with leadership in formal organizations (e.g., the work of the Ohio State/Michigan studies and Fiedler). Moral leadership would deal with what types of goals the leader should set (e.g., the Navy
definition). In this context I have in mind socially defined goals, on a very largerather than an immediate scale.

We have a parallel to this in economics where the field is split into macro- and microeconomics. The macroeconomic section has had broad goals established for it by the (Full) Employment Act of 1948, which stated that it was: "...the continuing policy and responsibility of the Federal Government...to promote maximum employment, production, and purchasing power." Why couldn't we delimit domains of macro- and micro-leadership? Micro-leadership could be based on the influence process propounded by Bass. It would be subject to empirical test in accordance with the tenets of the scientific method. Macro-leadership would then deal with broad social issues and complex situations which could not effectively be broken down into micro-leadership acts for purposes of analysis. These issues and situations would not yield easily to scientific analysis and the development of theory. Nevertheless, the beginnings of a theory of macro-leadership would be very helpful in evaluating progress toward accomplishment of socially desirable ends.

Why would such a distinction be important? Consider the interracial brawling aboard the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier Kittyhawk in 1972 in which 46 people were injured. The fight took place several weeks after a highly popular Commanding Officer had been relieved. The new Commanding Officer had remained aloof from the crew since he had come aboard. Time magazine noted: "One inevitable conclusion...is that
the trouble might have been avoided if the ship's captain had paid full heed to the storm warnings, which had been flapping for weeks and months before. In this instance, better moral (macro-)leadership might have prevented the occurrence of a socially debilitating incident. But note that the situation aboard the Kittyhawk developed so rapidly, and over such a vast area, that no existing theory of micro-leadership, no matter how well defined, could be applied on a broad enough scale to do any good.

We need to develop leadership theory on a more aggregate scale to cope with broad-based situations such as this. In the future leadership theory must expand its scope to include dealing with large-scale social problems. Otherwise leadership theory will be relegated to explaining a rather narrow range of phenomena at the micro level.
NOTES


6. R. Michels, Political Parties (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 64 ff. This work was originally published in 1915.


Note Eugene E. Jennings's commentary, "Fifty years of study have failed to produce one personality trait or set of qualities that can be used to discriminate leaders and non-leaders." (Management of Personnel Quarterly, I, No. 1 [Autumn 1961]). A critique of the trait theory is given in A. Gouldner, Studies in Leadership (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), pp. 23-25.


11. The remainder of this section adapted from A. Tannenbaum, Social Psychology of the Work Organization (Belmont, Calif., Wadsworth, 1966), pp. 70-76.


14. Ibid., p. 94.

15. Ibid., p. 96.


17. This description of Fiedler's contingency model is adapted from Hersey and Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior Utilizing Human Resources*, pp. 76-76. For a more complete description and a report of findings, see Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness*.


19. Bass, *Leadership, Psychology, and Organizational Behavior*, does differentiate leadership from allied concepts, e.g., behavioral contagion, innate connections, influence, followership, vicarious experience (pp. 93-96), and coercion, wherein members publicly but not privately comply with suggestions or direction of another member (p. 454). However, he does not raise the normative issue of what the leader "should" be changing behavior towards.