

Classical Leadership - Michele Erina Doyle and Mark K. Smith

What is leadership? Here Michele Erina Doyle and Mark K. Smith explore some of the classical models of leadership. In particular they look at earlier approaches to studying the area via the notions of traits and behaviours, and to what has become known as contingency theory. From there they turn to more recent, 'transformational' theories and some issues of practice.

Many of the images associated with leadership have their roots in conflict. It is the stuff of generals who outwit their opponents, politicians who convince and channel groups into action, and people who take control of a crisis. We are directed to special individuals like Gandhi or Joan of Arc; Napoleon or Hitler. The stories around such people seem to show that there are moments of crisis or decision where the actions of one person are pivotal. They have a vision of what can, and should be, done and can communicate this to others. When these are absent there can be trouble. Quality of leadership is, arguably, central to the survival and success of groups and organizations. As *The Art of War*, the oldest known military text (circa 400 BC), puts it, 'the leader of armies is the arbiter of the people's fate, the man on whom it depends whether the nation shall be in peace or in peril' (Waging war [20]).

But what is leadership? It seems to be one of those qualities that you know when you see it, but is difficult to describe. There are almost as many definitions as there are commentators. Many associate leadership with one person leading. Four things stand out in this respect. First, to lead involves influencing others. Second, where there are leaders there are followers. Third, leaders seem to come to the fore when there is a crisis or special problem. In other words, they often become visible when an innovative response is needed. Fourth, leaders are people who have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and why. Thus, leaders are people who are able to think and act creatively in non-routine situations – and who set out to influence the actions, beliefs and feelings of others. In this sense being a 'leader' is personal. It flows from an individual's qualities and actions. However, it is also often linked to some other role such as manager or expert. Here there can be a lot of confusion. Not all managers, for example, are leaders; and not all leaders are managers.

In the recent literature of leadership (that is over the last 80 years or so) there have been four main 'generations' of theory:

- Trait theories.
- Behavioural theories.
- Contingency theories.
- Transformational theories.

It is important, as John van Maurik (2001: 2-3) has pointed out, to recognize that none of the four 'generations' is mutually exclusive or totally time-bound.

Although it is true that the progression of thinking tends to follow a sequential path, it is quite possible for elements of one generation to crop up much later in the writings of someone who would not normally think of himself or herself as being of that school. Consequently, it is fair to say that each generation has added something to the overall debate on leadership and that the debate continues. (van Maurik 2001: 3)

This fourfold division of 'modern' (management) leadership can go under different titles (e.g. we might discuss charismatic rather than transformational leadership), and there are other possible candidates e.g. skill-based approaches and self-management or shared leadership (discussed elsewhere on these pages). However, these four formations can be seen as sharing some common qualities – and we can approach them as variations of the 'classical' model of leadership.

Traits

Leaders are people, who are able to express themselves fully, says Warren Bennis. 'They also know what they want', he continues, 'why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others, in order to gain their co-operation and support.' Lastly, 'they know how to achieve their goals' (Bennis 1998: 3). But what is it that makes someone exceptional in this respect? As soon as we study the lives of people who have been labelled as great or effective leaders, it becomes clear that they have very different qualities. We only have to think of political figures like Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher and Mao Zedong to confirm this.

Instead of starting with exceptional individuals many turned to setting out the general qualities or *traits* they believed should be present. Surveys of early trait research by Stogdill (1948) and Mann (1959) reported that many studies identified personality characteristics that appear to differentiate leaders from followers. However, as Peter Wright (1996: 34) has commented, 'others found no differences between leaders and followers with respect to these characteristics, or even found people who possessed them were less likely to become leaders'. Yet pick up almost any of the popular books on the subject today and you will still find a list of traits that are thought to be central to effective leadership. The basic idea remains that if a person possesses these she or he will be able to take the lead in very different situations. At first glance, the lists seem to be helpful (see, for example, *Exhibit 1*). But spend any time around them and they can leave a lot to be desired.

Exhibit 1: Gardner's leadership attributes

John Gardner studied a large number of North American organizations and leaders and came to the conclusion that there were some qualities or attributes that did appear to mean that a leader in one situation could lead in another. These included:

- Physical vitality and stamina
- Intelligence and action-oriented judgement

- Eagerness to accept responsibility
- Task competence
- Understanding of followers and their needs
- Skill in dealing with people
- Need for achievement
- Capacity to motivate people
- Courage and resolution
- Trustworthiness
- Decisiveness
- Self-confidence
- Assertiveness
- Adaptability/flexibility

John Gardner (1989) *On Leadership*, New York: Free Press.

The first problem is that the early searchers after traits often assumed that there was a definite set of characteristics that made a leader - whatever the situation. In other words, they thought the same traits would work on a battlefield and in the staff room of a school. They minimized the impact of the situation (Sadler 1997). They, and later writers, also tended to mix some very different qualities. Some of Gardner's qualities, for example, are aspects of a person's behaviour, some are skills, and others are to do with temperament and intellectual ability. Like other lists of this nature it is quite long - so what happens when someone has some but not all of the qualities? On the other hand, the list is not exhaustive and it is possible that someone might have other 'leadership qualities'. What of these?

More recently people have tried looking at what combinations of traits might be good for a particular situation. There is some mileage in this. It appears possible to link clusters of personality traits to success in different situations, as Stogdill has subsequently suggested (Wright 1996: 35. Wright goes on to explore modern trait theories in a separate chapter - 1996: 169-193). However, it remains an inexact science!

One of the questions we hear most often around such lists concerns their apparent 'maleness' (e.g. Rosener 1997). When men and women are asked about each other's characteristics and leadership qualities, some significant patterns emerge. Both tend to have difficulties in seeing women as leaders. The attributes associated with leadership on these lists are often viewed as male. However, whether the characteristics of leaders can be gendered is questionable. If it is next to impossible to make a list of leadership traits that stands up to questioning, then the same

certainly applies to lists of gender specific leadership traits!

Behaviours

As the early researchers ran out of steam in their search for traits, they turned to what leaders did - how they behaved (especially towards followers). They moved from leaders to leadership - and this became the dominant way of approaching leadership within organizations in the 1950s and early 1960s. Different patterns of behaviour were grouped together and labelled as styles. This became a very popular activity within management training – perhaps the best known being Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (1964; 1978). Various schemes appeared, designed to diagnose and develop people's style of working. Despite different names, the basic ideas were very similar. The four main styles that appear are:

- **Concern for task.** Here leaders emphasize the achievement of concrete objectives. They look for high levels of productivity, and ways to organize people and activities in order to meet those objectives.
- **Concern for people.** In this style, leaders look upon their followers as people - their needs, interests, problems, development and so on. They are not simply units of production or means to an end.
- **Directive leadership.** This style is characterized by leaders taking decisions for others - and expecting followers or subordinates to follow instructions.
- **Participative leadership.** Here leaders try to share decision-making with others. (Wright 1996: 36-7)

Often, we find two of these styles present in books and training materials. For example, concern for task is set against concern for people (after Blake and Mouton 1964); and directive is contrasted with participative leadership (for example, McGregor's [1960] portrayal of managers as 'Theory X' or 'Theory Y'). If you have been on a teamwork or leadership development course then it is likely you will have come across some variant of this in an exercise or discussion.

Many of the early writers that looked to participative and people-centred leadership, argued that it brought about greater satisfaction amongst followers (subordinates). However, as Sadler (1997) reports, when researchers really got to work on this it didn't seem to stand up. There were lots of differences and inconsistencies between studies. It was difficult to say style of leadership was significant in enabling one group to work better than another. Perhaps the main problem, though, was one shared with those who looked for traits (Wright 1996: 47). The researchers did not look properly at the context or setting in which the style was used. Is it possible that the same style would work as well in a gang or group of friends, and in a hospital emergency room? The styles that leaders can adopt are far more affected by those they are working with, and the environment they are operating within, than had been originally thought.

Situations

Researchers began to turn to the contexts in which leadership is exercised - and the idea that what is needed changes from situation to situation. Some looked to the processes by which leaders emerge in different circumstances - for example at moments of great crisis or where there is a vacuum. Others turned to the ways in which leaders and followers viewed each other in various contexts - for example in the army, political parties and in companies. The most extreme view was that just about everything was determined by the context. But most writers did not take this route. They brought the idea of style with them, believing that the style needed would change with the situation. Another way of putting this is that particular contexts would demand particular forms of leadership. This placed a premium on people who were able to develop an ability to work in different ways, and could change their style to suit the situation.

What began to develop was a *contingency* approach. The central idea was that effective leadership was dependent on a mix of factors. For example, Fred E. Fiedler argued that effectiveness depends on two interacting factors: leadership style and the degree to which the situation gives the leader control and influence. Three things are important here:

- **The relationship between the leaders and followers.** If leaders are liked and respected they are more likely to have the support of others.
- **The structure of the task.** If the task is clearly spelled out as to goals, methods and standards of performance then it is more likely that leaders will be able to exert influence.
- **Position power.** If an organization or group confers powers on the leader for the purpose of getting the job done, then this may well increase the influence of the leader. (Fiedler and Garcia 1987: 51 – 67. See, also, Fiedler 1997)

Models like this can help us to think about what we are doing in different situations. For example, we may be more directive where a quick response is needed, and where people are used to being told what to do, rather than having to work at it themselves. They also found their way into various management training aids – such as the development of Mouton and Blake's managerial grid by Reddin (1970; 1987) that looked to the interaction of the characteristics of the leader, the characteristics of the followers and the situation; and Hersey and Blanchard's (1977) very influential discussion of choosing the appropriate style for the particular situation.

Exhibit 2: Hersey and Blanchard (1977) on leadership style and situation

Hersey and Blanchard identified four different leadership styles that could be drawn upon to deal with contrasting situations:

Telling (high task/low relationship behaviour). This style or approach is characterized by giving a great deal of direction to subordinates and by giving considerable attention to defining roles and goals. The style was recommended for dealing with new staff, or where the work was menial or repetitive, or where things had to be completed within a short time span. Subordinates are viewed as being unable and

unwilling to 'do a good job'.

Selling (high task/high relationship behaviour). Here, while most of the direction is given by the leader, there is an attempt at encouraging people to 'buy into' the task. Sometimes characterized as a 'coaching' approach, it is to be used when people are willing and motivated but lack the required 'maturity' or 'ability'.

Participating (high relationship/low task behaviour). Here decision-making is shared between leaders and followers – the main role of the leader being to facilitate and communicate. It entails high support and low direction and is used when people are able, but are perhaps unwilling or insecure (they are of 'moderate to high maturity' (Hersey 1984).

Delegating (low relationship/low task behaviour). The leader still identifies the problem or issue, but the responsibility for carrying out the response is given to followers. It entails having a high degree of competence and maturity (people know what to do, and are motivated to do it).

Aside from their very general nature, there are some issues with such models. First, much that has been written has a North American bias. There is a lot of evidence to suggest cultural factors influence the way that people carry out, and respond to, different leadership styles. For example, some cultures are more individualistic, or value family as against bureaucratic models, or have very different expectations about how people address and talk with each other. All this impacts on the choice of style and approach.

Second, as we saw earlier, there may be different patterns of leadership linked with men and women. Some have argued that women may have leadership styles that are more nurturing, caring and sensitive. They look more to relationships. Men are said to look to task. However, there is a lot of debate about this. We can find plenty of examples of nurturing men and task-oriented women. Any contrasts between the style of men and women may be down to the situation. In management, for example, women are more likely to be in positions of authority in people-oriented sectors – so this aspect of style is likely to be emphasized.

Third, as Bolman and Deal (1997: 302) comment, like Blake and Mouton before them, writers like Hersey and Blanchard 'focus mainly on the relationship between managers and immediate subordinates, and say little about issues of structure, politics or symbols'.

Transformations

Burns (1977) argued that it was possible to distinguish between transactional and transforming leaders. The former, 'approach their followers with an eye to trading one thing for another (1977: 4), while the latter are visionary leaders who seek to appeal to their followers 'better nature and move them toward higher and more universal needs and purposes' (Bolman and Deal 1997: 314). In other words, the leader is seen as a change agent.

Exhibit 3: Transactional and transformational leadership

Transactional

The transactional leader:

Recognizes what it is that we want to get from work and tries to ensure that we get it if our performance merits it.

Exchanges rewards and promises for our effort.

Is responsive to our immediate self interests if they can be met by getting the work done

Transformational

The transformational leader:

Raises our level of awareness, our level of consciousness about the significance and value of designated outcomes, and ways of reaching them.

Gets us transcend our own self-interest for the sake of the team, organization or larger polity.

Alters our need level (after Maslow) and expands our range of wants and needs.

(Based on Bass 1985 - Wright 1996: 213)

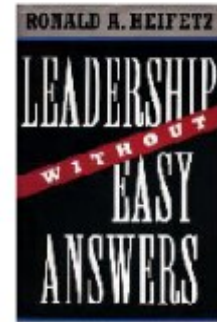
Bass (1985) was concerned that Burns (1977) set transactional and transforming leaders as polar opposites. Instead, he suggests we should be looking at the way in which transactional forms can be drawn upon and transformed. The resulting transformational leadership is said to be necessary because of the more sophisticated demands made of leaders. van Maurik (2001: 75) argues that such demands 'centre around the high levels of uncertainty experienced by leaders, their staff and, indeed, the whole organization... today'. He goes on to identify three broad bodies of writers in this orientation. Those concerned with:

- Team leadership e.g. Meredith Belbin.
- The leader as a catalyst of change e.g. Warren Bennis, James Kouzes and Barry Posner, and Stephen R. Covey.
- The leader as strategic visionary e.g. Peter Senge

The dividing lines between these is a matter for some debate; the sophistication of the analysis offered by different writers variable; and some of the writers may not recognize their placement – but there would appear to be a body of material that can be labelled transformational. There is strong emphasis in the contemporary literature of management leadership on charismatic and related forms of leadership. However, whether there is a solid body of evidence to support its effectiveness is an open question. Indeed, Wright (1996: 221) concludes 'it is impossible to say how effective transformational leadership is with any degree of certainty. We will return to some questions around charisma later – but first we need to briefly examine the nature of authority in organizations (and the relationship to leadership).

Authority

Frequently we confuse leadership with authority. To explore this we can turn to Heifetz's (1994) important discussion of the matter. Authority is often seen as the possession of powers based on formal role. In organizations, for example, we tend to focus on the manager or officer. They are seen as people who have the right to direct us. We obey them because we see their exercise of power as legitimate. It may also be that we fear the consequences of not following their orders or 'requests'. The possibility of them sacking, demoting or disadvantaging us may well secure our compliance. We may also follow them because they show leadership. As we have seen, the latter is generally something more informal - the ability to make sense of, and act in, situations that are out of the ordinary. In this way, leaders don't simply influence; they have to show that crises or unexpected events and experiences do not faze them. Leaders may have formal authority, but they rely in large part on informal authority. This flows from their personal qualities and actions. They may be trusted, respected for their expertise, or followed because of their ability to persuade.



Leaders have authority as part of an exchange: if they fail to deliver the goods, to meet people's expectations, they run the risk of authority being removed and given to another. Those who have formal authority over them may take this action. However, we also need to consider the other side. Followers, knowingly or unknowingly, accept the right of the person to lead – and he or she is dependent on this. The leader also relies on 'followers' for feedback and contributions. Without these they will not have the information and resources to do their job. Leaders and followers are interdependent.

People who do not have formal positions of power can also enjoy informal authority. In a football team, for example, the manager may not be the most influential person. It could be an established player who can read the game and energise that colleagues turn to. In politics a classic example is Gandhi – who for much of the time held no relevant formal position – but through his example and his thinking became an inspiration for others.

Having formal authority is both a resource and a constraint. On the one hand it can bring access to systems and resources. Handled well it can help people feel safe. On the other hand, formal authority carries a set of expectations – and these can be quite unrealistic in times of crisis. As Heifetz puts it, 'raise hard questions and one risks getting cut down, even if the questions are important for moving forward on the problem' (1994: 180). Being outside the formal power structure, but within an organization, can be an advantage. You can have more freedom of movement, the chance of focussing on what you see as the issue (rather than the organization's focus), and there is a stronger chance of being in touch with what people are feeling 'at the frontline'.

Charisma

Before moving on it is important to look at the question of charisma. It is so much a part of how we look at leadership - but is such a difficult quality to tie down. Charisma is, literally, a gift of grace or of God (Wright 1996: 194). Max Weber, more than anyone, brought this idea into the realm of leadership. He used 'charisma' to

talk about self-appointed leaders who are followed by those in distress. Such leaders gain influence because they are seen as having special talents or gifts that can help people escape the pain they are in (Gerth and Mills 1991: 51 – 55).

When thinking about charisma we often look to the qualities of particular individuals - their skills, personality and presence. But this is only one side of things. We need to explore the situations in which charisma arises. When strong feelings of distress are around there does seem to be a tendency to turn to figures who seem to have answers. To make our lives easier we may want to put the burden of finding and making solutions on someone else. In this way we help to make the role for 'charismatic leaders' to step into. They in turn will seek to convince us of their special gifts and of their solution to the crisis or problem. When these things come together something very powerful can happen. It doesn't necessarily mean that the problem is dealt with - but we can come to believe it is. Regarding such leaders with awe, perhaps being inspired in different ways by them, we can begin to feel safer and directed. This can be a great resource. Someone like Martin Luther King used the belief that people had in him to take forward civil rights in the United States. He was able to contain a lot of the stress his supporters felt and give hope of renewal. He articulated a vision of what was possible and worked with people to develop strategies. But there are also considerable dangers.

Charisma involves dependency. It can mean giving up our responsibilities. Sadly, it is all too easy to let others who seem to know what they are doing get on with difficult matters. By placing people on a pedestal the distance between 'us' and 'them' widens. They seem so much more able or in control. Rather than facing up to situations, and making our own solutions, we remain followers (and are often encouraged to do so). There may well come a point when the lie implicit in this confronts us. Just as we turned to charismatic leaders, we can turn against them. It could be we recognize that the 'solution' we signed up to has not made things better. It might be that some scandal or incident reveals the leader in what we see as a bad light. Whatever, we can end up blaming, and even destroying, the leader. Unfortunately, we may simply turn to another rather than looking to our own capacities.

In conclusion

On this page we have tried to set out some of the elements of a 'classical' view of leadership. We have seen how commentators have searched for special traits and behaviours and looked at the different situations where leaders work and emerge. Running through much of this is a set of beliefs that we can describe as a classical view of leadership where leaders:

- Tend to be identified by position. They are part of the hierarchy.
- Become the focus for answers and solutions. We look to them when we don't know what to do, or when we can't be bothered to work things out for ourselves.
- Give direction and have vision.
- Have special qualities setting them apart. These help to create the gap between leaders and followers.

This view of leadership sits quite comfortably with the forms of organization that are common in business, the armed forces and government. Where the desire is to get something done, to achieve a narrow range of objectives in a short period of time, then it may make sense to think in this way. However, this has its dangers. Whilst some 'classical' leaders may have a more participative style, it is still just a style. A great deal of power remains in their hands and the opportunity for all to take responsibility and face larger questions is curtailed. It can also feed into a 'great-man' model of leadership and minimize our readiness to question those who present us with easy answers. As our awareness of our own place in the making of leadership grows, we may be less ready to hand our responsibilities to others. We may also come to realize our own power:

I don't think it's actually possible to lead somebody. I think you can allow yourself to be led. It's a bit like other things - you can't teach, you can only learn - because you can only control yourself.

More inclusive and informal understandings of leadership offer some interesting possibilities, as we can see in our discussion of **shared leadership**.

Further reading and references

For a full, annotated booklist go to **the leadership booklist**.

Bolman, L. G. and Deal, T. E. (1997) *Reframing Organizations. Artistry, choice and leadership* 2e, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 450 pages. The writers examine four organizational frames (differing perspectives) related to structures, human resources, politics and symbols. Good leaders are skilled at looking at the organization through these differing frames - and developing their own according to the situation.

Grint, K. (ed.) (1997) *Leadership. Classical, contemporary and critical approaches*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 385 + xvii pages. Excellent collection of key discussions of classical, traditional, modern and alternative forms of leadership.

Heifetz, R. A. (1994) *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press. 348 + xi pages. Just about the best of the more recent books on leadership. Looks to bring back ethical questions to the centre of debates around leadership, and turns to the leader as educator. A particular emphasis on the exploration of leadership within authority and non-authority relationships. Good on distinguishing between technical and adaptive situations.

Kouzes, J. M. and Posner, B. Z. (1995) *The Leadership Challenge*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 390 pages. Revised edition of an established text that offers a presentation of leadership set on a framework for leadership development.

Van Maurik, J. (2001) *Writers on Leadership*, London: Penguin. 248+vii pages. Useful primer on key twentieth century writers on leadership.

Sadler, P. (1997) *Leadership*, London: Kogan Page. 157 pages. Produced as an MBA primer, this book provides a quick but careful introduction to the area for people with some background in management or the social sciences. Chapters look at the nature of leadership; leadership and management; leadership qualities; leader behaviour;

styles of leadership; recruiting and selecting future leaders; the developing process; cultural differences and diversity; role models; the new leadership.

Stogdill, R. M. (1974) *Handbook of Leadership. A survey of theory and research*, New York: Free Press. The Handbook was a major reference point concerning the state of play in leadership research and has been subsequently updated by B. M. Bass (1990 - *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, research and managerial applications*, New York: Free Press). However, Stogdill's earlier work with the Ohio State Leadership Studies was an important attempt to set leadership in an organizational context through proper research. Grint (1997) reproduces a classic paper from 1950 - 'Leadership, membership and organization'.

Wright, P. (1996) *Managerial Leadership*, London: Routledge. 260 + x pages. More of a traditional textbook approach (which may come as a relief to those over-exposed to the racier, populist texts that dominate this area). A careful dissecting of this 'elusive' notion. Chapters on the meaning and measurement of leadership; management; early approaches - traits and styles; situational style theories of leadership; situational style theories - some general issues; alternative approaches; self-management; modern trait theories; charismatic and related forms of leadership; conclusions.

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