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Jürgen Weibler*

New Perspectives on Leadership Research**

*Leadership is – or can be made to be – the
most genuinely interdisciplinary program I have known*
James MacGregor Burns (2001)

Leadership research, dedicated to *organizations*, provides both scholars and practitioners with valuable knowledge about describing and explaining structures and processes of social relationships given certain assumptions and interests. Depending on what criteria we use to assess the overall utility of this knowledge, we will reach different conclusions. However, regardless of the criteria used, the need for further elaboration in this field is indisputable, despite the impressive work that has been done to date (for an overview, see, for instance, Bass 1990; Goethals/Sorenson/Burns 2004; House/Aditya 1997; Kieser/Reber/Wunderer 1995; Weibler 2001, 2004a; Yukl 2002).

The goal of this special issue is to advance our theoretical understanding of certain aspects and dimensions of leadership. From the early 1980s there has been an explosion of intellectual curiosity about new forms of leadership in both scientific and professional fields. This development is a result of the fact that the context of leadership (markets, organizations, and work-related issues) has changed dramatically in the recent past and may well change in the future even more, leading some to question whether traditional or established leadership approaches are sufficient to deal with the new developments. To complicate matters, the adequacy of some current leadership theories for solving practical problems are being questioned – possibly an indication that the integration of leadership theory and organizational practice is still ill-conceptualized. Alternative methodologies and advancements in methods might help to solve this problem.

These developments and problems raise many questions and open challenging research agendas. Significantly, they lead us back to some of the fundamental topics that leadership research is confronted with in principle. The main current question may well be how we should understand leadership as such. Leadership research has generally focused on the position of the leader, dwelling on the traits and behaviors of leaders and neglecting the position of the follower as an autonomous acting individual. The processes and mechanisms that link leaders and followers have also been insufficiently studied (Lord/Brown 2004; Weibler 2004b). Therefore, a guiding perspective

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could be to view leadership as a jointly created, mutually accepted special relationship that gets its changing, concrete gestalt from the mode of intercourse of two (or more) directly or indirectly connected persons, embedded in a necessarily constraining situation and context, who together strive to solve problems.

From this perspective a leader-follower relationship can – in its widest sense – be understood as a *discursive arrangement* in which stable boundaries between leaders and followers fade (see also Burns 1998; Hollander 1992). Consequently, “this alternative conception of leadership does not require an individual who can perform all of the essential leadership functions, only a set of people who collectively perform them. Some leadership functions . . . may be shared by several members of a group, some leadership functions may be allocated to individual members, and a particular leadership function may be performed by different people at different times” (Yukl 1999, 292–293). Along the same lines, Burns speaks congenially about a “multiplicity of the actor’s role” (1998, 2). This kind of approach raises questions for which answers can be partly constructed based on already existing elaborations. To name some of the central questions: What conditions enable or inhibit relational processes (e.g., Dachler 1991)? What theory or theories can help us understand the character and essence of relational processes (for instance, Bradbury/Lichtenstein 2000; Burns 1998)? Which cognitions, emotions, and motivations are at play and how do they interrelate (e.g., Burkitt 1997; George 2000; Lord/Maher 1991)? How should leadership education be organized (e.g., Colvin 2003)? What things must we consider – from an ethical standpoint – in the leader-follower relationship (Ciulla 1995; Kuhn/Weibler 2003; Weibler 2004c)? And finally, What are the implications for more integrative leadership models and practices?

Investigating these questions entails a challenging research program, with many avenues to be pursued and many difficulties to be overcome. While searching for answers, we must simultaneously and continuously be consolidating the knowledge we gain. Where there are neglected aspects of leadership, we have to fill them in – a process that should lead to interesting new statements on the topic. Furthermore, we must remember to take into account developments within organizations and among their members.

With this reality in mind, the authors of this special issue share their well-founded views on important topics with us and provide us with a base for further research. What these papers have in common is an effort to concentrate on subjects that have been given short shrift to date.

The first paper, by Jörg Felfe, Kathrin Tartler, and Detlev Liepmann, tests the strength of Bass’s transformational leadership model in a different cultural context. In doing so, they contribute to the current discussion about cross-cultural themes in leadership, rekindled recently by two books (Hofstede 2001 and House et al. 2004). Implications for managerial practice are also derived. Moreover, Felfe, Tartler, and Liepmann also offer some interesting new theoretical insights into transformational leadership and commitment as well as into the significance of followers’ characteristics in this kind of leadership model.

In the second paper, *Birgit Schyns and Gisela Mohr* examine the importance of non-verbal behavior in the context of leadership. They make a great effort to collect and analyze existing data and ideas relating to nonverbal behavior and to transfer it to the study of leadership. Their work is an impressive demonstration of how material that originates outside leadership research can be fruitfully used to deal with genuine leadership questions. The finding that nonverbal cues play a prominent role in the leaders' interactions with others is important for theory building as well as for leaders themselves.

In the third paper, *Oliver Fischer and Antony Manstead* outline a theory of computer-mediated leadership, drawing on research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and leadership. Again, their work shows that innovative thinking is likely to originate on the interface between two usually unrelated disciplines. The authors use Spears and Lea's SIDE theory (social identity model of deindividuation effects) of computer-mediated communication and Hogg's social identity theory to enrich our understanding of followers' impressions of leaders and leaders' interactions with followers, respectively. Interestingly, this paper ties in with the earlier papers when the authors address charisma theory and contrast types of virtual communication and their effects with types and effects of face-to-face interactions.

Next, *Peter Maas and Albert Graf* broaden our usual understanding of what it means to be a leader by concentrating their attention on the leadership potential of a company's customers. They are able to demonstrate the increasing influence customers have on an enterprise's service processes, and they use their observations to derive a somewhat speculative but meaningful conclusion for leadership within organizations. Their argument posits, with reference to the substitution theory of leadership, that a superior is unable, or at least limited in his or her ability, to influence his or her subordinates under certain conditions. The more the customer shapes interactions with an employee, the more the customer takes over the role that once the employee's superior performed alone. This perspective not only opens our minds to the potential richness of marketing and service literature for leadership, it also brings to the foreground actors in the leadership interaction that we have hardly noticed in the past. As customer value management reveals, the jump between an interaction and a mutually created relation is fluid.

In the last two papers, which were solicited for this volume, the authors comment on current developments in leadership and articulate clear positions, perspectives, and paths for further research.

Paul Hanges and Gary Shteynberg share with us sophisticated ideas about leadership research methodologies (methods) and give readers an excellent, necessarily focused overview of the possibilities and risks associated with conducting empirical research. For example, we learn much about such methodological concerns as choice of an appropriate level of analysis, sampling countries in cross-cultural research, and alternative measurement strategies. With respect to the last point, interested readers will benefit from Hanges and Shteynberg's proposed implicit attitude (IA) measure, a technique, deriving from social psychology, with the aim of minimizing the influence of self-presentation bias. This is of great importance because the current method of choice in leadership research is explicit response, such as self-report ratings and verbal

reports. Researchers may be encouraged to make use of this promising alternative in future studies. Though the authors concentrate on quantitative empirical approaches, they nonetheless make a plea for efforts in a qualitative sense.

Finally, *Angela Gordon and Gary Yukl* inform us about some of the challenges and opportunities in leadership research, sketching a picture of a possible future in this field and calling for some necessary improvements. They see, for instance, the necessity of connecting micro-level leadership conceptualizations with strategic leadership, an area, by the way, in which German (European) scholars have some especially valuable contributions to make. Gordon and Yukl also make a plea for a greater emphasis on relational processes in leadership and stress the necessity of time in research, among many other points. The importance of allowing adequate time for research surely cannot be overestimated. Investing more time and effort in a topic, concentrating on and conducting research from, for example, a longitudinal perspective, can yield results that are truly durable and remind us of the careful work upon which numerous leadership classics rest. Gordon and Yukl's final remark – that organizations today are dramatically different from their predecessors, which leads to new challenges for leadership – not only brings us back to the reason for this special issue but indicates that there is still much more to do in the future. Leadership research remains an ongoing process.

It is the hope of the authors – who, incidentally, come from several different countries – and the editor that these articles will inspire scholars who are starting, continuing, or deepening their work on leadership to explore new insights both by developing fresh theories and by consolidating already existing approaches. To reach this goal it might be of great advantage if Anglo-American approaches and European perspectives were to merge where possible and deliberately separate when necessary for a more profound and full understanding of leadership. For this, a more institutionalized networking research forum might be very helpful (contact: juergen.weibler@fernuni-hagen.de).

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