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The Future of Leadership Research: Challenges and Opportunities**

For over a half century, leadership researchers have attempted to identify the aspects of leadership that improve organizational performance, yet the answer is still elusive. In this commentary, we discuss several reasons for the slow progress. There is a lack of collaborative effort between academics and practitioners, and the leadership theory and research has lacked adequate emphasis on strategic issues, explanatory processes, and the moderating effects of the situation. We discuss these shortcomings and ways to remedy them.

Key words: **Leadership, Leadership Research, Leader Effectiveness**

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Introduction

For over fifty years, leadership researchers have attempted to identify the aspects of leadership that improve organizational performance. Countless studies have been conducted over the past half century to determine why some leaders are more effective than others, but the answer is elusive and leadership researchers are still attempting to answer this question.

In this commentary, we will outline several reasons for the slow progress. One reason is that both academics and practitioners are interested in effective leadership, yet there is little convergence in conceptualizations of effective leadership. Another reason is that leadership has generally been examined at lower-levels of the organization instead of looking at strategic leadership by top executives. A third reason is that there is an overemphasis on finding universally relevant predictors of effective leadership; there is not enough attention to situational factors and the context in which leadership occurs. A fourth reason is that the majority of leadership theories focus on outcome prediction rather than explaining the underlying processes of leadership.

We will discuss these shortcomings as well as some current research being conducted to deal with them. We will also discuss key ideas related to each shortcoming that present opportunities for future research. Our hope is that this commentary will encourage a renewed and productive drive toward the search for effective leadership.

Academic versus practitioner perspectives

Both academics and practitioners recognize the challenges and opportunities within the future of leadership research, yet little collaborative work has been done. Academics tend to view the practitioner literature on effective leadership as “fluff” that has little substance or rigor to support the propositions made in it. On the other hand, many practitioners view academic research as impractical and ungrounded in real life (Zaccaro/Horn 2003).

Reasons for this academic-practitioner divide include different priorities and conceptualizations of leadership as well as commonly held misconceptions about it. Academics long for a deeper understanding of leadership processes, but practitioners get frustrated with academic theories that fail to offer real solutions. One common misconception is that leadership and management are two separate and mutually exclusive processes. However, they are complementary processes and can be performed by the same person (Kotter 1990; Yukl/Lepsinger 2004).

Researchers have begun to recognize the need to merge leadership theory and practice. For example, Zaccaro and Horn (2003) propose a model of leadership theory and practice symbiosis (LTPS) that could involve both academics and practitioners in a dialogue about meaningful research. They encourage the use of a mix of traditional academic research methods and applied tools that have been validated.

In our opinion, the challenge for leadership researchers is to bridge the gap between the academic and practitioner worlds. We suggest a number of research opportunities. First, popular management literature should be critically analyzed in light of academic leadership theories to discover convergence and points of departure with leadership theory. Second, although nearly 80% of the studies published

in *Leadership Quarterly* in the past ten years were conducted in field settings (Lowe/Gardner 2000), most of them use survey research to examine dynamic constructs. We recommend that academic researchers include more alternative methodologies such as experiments and comparative case studies to benefit from the richness of field data. Finally, building on Zaccaro and Horn's proposal, academics and practitioners need to start talking to each other and to recognize that both groups have the same goal, namely learning about effective leadership.

Dyadic versus organizational leadership

Leadership is present at all levels of the organization, yet traditional leadership theory is oriented toward dyadic processes that occur at low levels of the organization. Katz and Kahn (1978) offered their systems view of organizations nearly thirty years ago, yet most researchers still define leadership as a micro-organizational phenomenon occurring between a leader and a follower, while ignoring multiple stakeholders and competing demands on leaders.

Strategic leadership is a subtopic with a broader perspective that recognizes leadership occurs at all levels of the organization and involves external as well as internal processes. The terms "strategic leadership" and "executive leadership" have been used interchangeably, and they both involve management of the organization as a whole (including all of its subcomponents) and efforts to attain short and long term objectives for the organization (Rowe 2001).

Top level executives in a large organization often have considerable potential for improving organizational performance with the use of "indirect" forms of leadership (Hunt 1991; Lord/Maher 1991). Indirect leadership can take many forms, including improvement programs, management systems, structural forms, external arrangements (e.g., strategic alliances, joint ventures), and use of cultural forms (e.g., rituals, ceremonies, symbols, myths). The potential influence of leaders is often greater for relevant forms of indirect leadership than for direct forms of leadership behavior with subordinates. However, the indirect forms of leadership must be compatible with the direct leadership behaviors used by managers at all levels of the organization (Yukl/Lepsinger 2004). Unfortunately, the traditional leadership literature seldom mentions indirect forms of leadership, and there is no theory or research on how to integrate direct and indirect forms of leadership.

As noted earlier, strategic leadership includes the selection, implementation, and use of relevant structural forms. More organizations now use alternatives to the traditional hierarchical structure, such as top management teams, cross-functional teams, self-managed teams, and other structural forms involving decentralized decisions and shared power, yet there has been little theory or research on leadership processes in such organizations. The traditional leadership literature has described participation and empowerment primarily in terms of giving subordinates more influence over decisions about how to do their work. The type of leadership needed to facilitate the success of shared and distributed leadership in the context of decentralized organizations has received little attention. As in the earlier model of participative leadership by Vroom and Yetton (1973), a more strategic model of empowered leadership in

organizations must take into account the conditions that determine which forms of leadership are relevant and feasible.

The challenge for leadership researchers is to expand beyond traditional micro-level leadership conceptualizations. We recommend innovative theory building that includes leadership at all levels of the organization. Strategic leadership is a popular area of interest, but several areas of inquiry still need more examination. First is how macro-level organizational and economic variables affect the behavior of top managers (House/Aditya 1997). Second is how top managers and managers at other levels facilitate the success of organizational designs that emphasize shared leadership and empowerment. Third, although we have some idea of the content involved in strategic decision making, we do not have a clear understanding of the processes used by strategic leaders to make important decisions for the organization (Lowe/Gardner 2001). Finally, the definition of a strategic leader needs to expand beyond CEOs, because top management teams may be the actual strategic leaders for the organization (Zaccaro 2001).

Universal versus situational leadership

Universal leadership theories describe leadership that is applicable in all types of situations. Contemporary researchers have continued the call to identify universal leadership functions (House/Aditya 1997). Contingency theories, on the other hand, describe leader behaviors that are applicable in some situations but not others (Yukl 2002). Early leadership research on traits and skills attempted to develop a universal list of traits that could guarantee effectiveness. However, researchers found that although some traits and behaviors increase the likelihood of leader effectiveness, they are not relevant in all situations (Yukl 2002).

Universal theories of leadership are popular, but contextual theories provide a more realistic view of leadership in organizations. In recent years a few scholars have attempted to develop contextual models of leadership. For example, by drawing on strategy and organizational theory literatures, Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) propose a contextual theory of leadership that described four contexts (i.e., stability, crisis, dynamic equilibrium, and edge of chaos), and each context requires a different pattern of leader behavior.

Vera and Crossan (2004) recognized the contingent nature of strategic leadership in their model relating different types of leadership to organizational learning outcomes. The researchers suggest that transformational leadership is more effective in turbulent environments, times of poor organizational performance, and birth or decline organizational stages because transformational leader behaviors include inspiring others, encouraging change, and providing vision. These behaviors are necessary for leaders because they encourage employees to challenge the status quo and to think about potential futures for the organization (Vera/Crossan 2004).

In their flexible leadership model, Yukl and Lepsinger (2004) propose that organizational leaders can influence determinants of organizational performance such as efficiency and process reliability, innovation and adaptation, and human resources and relations. Leaders at all organizational levels can enhance these performance determinants, but they must adapt their behavior to fit the situation. The appropriate form of

direct and indirect leadership depends on the type of performance determinant to be influenced, the external environment and competitive strategy of the organization, and other aspects of the situation. Tradeoffs among the performance determinants, competing demands from a variety of stakeholders (e.g., owners and investors, employees, customers, etc.), and a rapidly changing environment make the leadership challenges more difficult (Yukl/Lepsinger, 2004).

Some empirical work has been done to determine whether effective leaders actually do vary their behaviors according to situational variables. Within the areas of transformational and charismatic leadership, there has been some empirical support for contextual models (e.g. Jacobsen/House 2001; Waldman et al. 2001). However, more work needs to be done. Studying these processes requires the use of innovative research methods including field experiments and qualitative ethnographic studies.

Outcome prediction versus process explanation

Theories created to explain effective leadership in the past have generally applied the same model of prediction. Most of theories try to predict leadership effectiveness by identifying essential traits, skills, and behaviors of leaders. The theory may or may not have moderating variables such as situational factors. The missing link in most of the leadership research is mediating variables that explain the processes underlying the relationships.

The challenge for leadership researchers is to spend more time examining this “black box” of leadership in order to explain why leadership is important and how leaders can influence followers or organizational performance. Researchers need to design studies that capture the rich nature of the explanatory processes involved in leadership. In addition, there is a need for theories that explain leadership as a reciprocal influence process. Causality is not unidirectional in leadership processes, and leader behavior can be a dependent variable as well as an independent variable (Yukl 2002). Leaders can influence followers, but the behavior of leaders is influenced by followers and the situation.

In order to examine leadership processes, there needs to be more emphasis on the role of time in research. If leadership is “essentially a relational process unfolding over time” (Den Hartog/Koopman 2001, 182), more research should be conducted from a longitudinal perspective. Rather than focusing on cross-sectional correlations, process research calls for an evaluation of how a phenomenon develops over time. Langley (1999) recognizes that data collected in process research is complex, but offers several strategies for analyzing qualitative process data in a meaningful way and points out that a mix of quantitative and qualitative data is appropriate in this type of research. Process research should emphasize the logical progression of a series of events. A variety of analytic strategies can be employed, such as the use of narrative, visual mapping of variables, and grounded theory, by examining the stories, mechanisms, and patterns involved in a phenomenon.

Conclusions

The field of leadership research has made some progress in understanding reasons for effective leadership. We are now aware of a myriad of leader behaviors that may influence leader effectiveness, the performance of the subordinates, and the success of the organization. We now recognize that leadership is more than a dyadic relationship with individual subordinates. We understand that leadership is not limited to a few heroes within organizations; effective, coordinated leadership is needed from the first-level managers to the CEO. We recognize that leaders need to tailor their behaviors and styles to the situation.

Nonetheless, after fifty years and thousands of studies, we should have gained greater insight into effective leadership. Organizations today are dramatically different from organizations fifty years ago. Leaders in contemporary organizations have to react to a variety of new challenges, including decentralized organizational forms, globalization, rapidly changing environments, diverse workforce, and new work arrangements. Researchers must verify whether effective leader behaviors identified in the past are still relevant in the contemporary business environment. More research is needed on traits and skills that seem especially relevant for leadership in a complex, turbulent environment (e.g. emotional intelligence, social intelligence, systems thinking, situational awareness, personal integrity).

Further progress will require more innovative research methods. Leadership researchers need to branch out beyond the safe and comfortable survey method to capture the truly dynamic qualities of leadership. We recommend more carefully planned research that includes a variety of methods, such as field experiments, simulations, and a greater use of qualitative methods. We also suggest using multiple methods whenever possible (Yukl 2002) and paying more attention to the appropriate levels of analysis for the theoretical constructs of interest (Dansereau/Yammarino/Markham 1995; Yammarino/Dansereau/Kennedy 2001).

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) recommend in-depth qualitative research to allow for questioning of preconceived notions within the field of leadership. We expand on their recommendation by suggesting that researchers carefully and thoughtfully examine constructs and their measurement to ensure that the essence of theoretical concepts is accurately operationalized. As Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Lee (2003) point out, failure to accurately measure constructs can cause serious problems in interpreting causal relationships. The use of improper measurement models can cause researchers and consumers of leadership research to assume incorrect relationships between variables.

In this commentary, we discussed several biases that have prevented a complete understanding of effective leadership. If the field of leadership research is to continue to thrive and respond to the changing nature of work, these challenges must be addressed and overcome. We believe that researchers can tackle the challenges put forth here to gain a better understanding of the dynamic qualities of effective leadership in organizations.

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