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The nature of leadership

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ABSTRACT Trait/characteristic theories and empirical approaches to the study of leadership have been supported by mounds of data, graphic models, and regression statistics. While there has been criticism of these mainstream approaches, there has been little in the way of meta-physical support developed for either side of the argument. This paper attempts to address the 'science' of leadership study at its most fundamental level.

KEYWORDS ethics ■ leadership ■ social evolution ■ transformative systems

Leadership studies in the past few decades have come under increasing criticism for maintaining outmoded constructs and for bearing less than scholastic integrity (Barker, 1997; Burns, 1978; Foster, 1986; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Rost, 1991). At a recent leadership conference, faculty members of internationally known leadership education programs involved themselves in a discussion about what to call leadership: is it an art, a study, a discipline, a theoretical construct, what? The discussion was interrupted by the dinner speaker who inadvertently answered the question by declaring that leadership is an industry. This answer may indicate something about the mounting criticism, that is, that the selling of leadership training and education has created an a priori agenda for research and conclusions about leadership. Would that the problems of leadership study were as simple as that.

Just as most English-speaking people use the word 'classical' to refer to any music associated with symphonic or chamber ensembles, most people use the word 'leadership' to refer to any activities or relationships associated

with persons occupying top positions in a hierarchy. Yet the words 'classical' and 'leadership' are indicative each of a specific phenomenon. Music scholars ignore popular terminology and carefully specify and define music according to its style, to its form, to its content, and to its function, conceptually separating the experience of what is 'Classical' from what is 'Baroque' and from what is 'Romantic'. Most leadership scholars have no such clearly defined taxonomy of activities or functions, and make no serious attempt to distinguish what they are studying from popular misconceptions (Rost, 1991).

There are those who would argue that distinguishing 'charismatic leadership' from, say, 'servant leadership' has accomplished the goal of classification. But, to use the music analogy, it is the same as distinguishing one of Mozart's symphonies from one of Haydn's symphonies. They are both examples of the same Classical form with differences which do not distinguish the form from other forms. Classical is one of many forms of music organization, which can be distinguished from other sound phenomena. Leadership is one of many forms of social organization, which can be distinguished from other human behavior phenomena. The need to distinguish leadership from other forms of social organization, such as management, is roughly the same as the need to distinguish Classical music from other forms of music organization. The distinction must be made using analysis that is consistent with its experiential nature, yet sufficient to make the distinction. In short, it must be phenomenological and metaphysical, and not merely quantitative.

At the end of his massive compilation of leadership research, Bass (1990) asserted that those who bemoan the inconclusiveness of the evidence and the subsequent dearth of understanding of leadership should be quieted by the sheer volume of pages of leadership findings. Yet, nowhere in his book did Bass make a serious attempt to articulate a metaphysical foundation for leadership study. While he acknowledged the existence of other views, Bass, like so many others, relied upon the dominant paradigm to be self-evident, and to be the view of choice for the future. This reliance is the result of a vested interest in the old thinking. Could it be that leadership scholars are not really scholars, but marketing representatives, developing programs for consumption by persons with business and political ambitions? Or, are leadership scholars simply less sophisticated than their counterparts in the physical sciences?

It is possible that the concept of leadership provides a 'social defense whose central aim is to repress uncomfortable needs, emotions, and wishes that emerge when people attempt to work together' (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992: 114). Gemmill and Oakley made an excellent case for the notion that leadership is an ideology designed to support the existing social order by

providing both a rationale for dysfunction and a direction in which to shift blame. Given that this is the case, there is no need for scholars to define leadership specifically. Indeed, there is incentive to avoid any precision that would explode the myth that certain individuals in a social system are entitled to a greater share of the wealth and power by virtue of their 'leadership abilities'.

However, there is a plethora of new thinking in the physical sciences and in philosophy that is challenging the historic, philosophical foundations of scientific theories. Old theories of leadership, management, and administration are contained within the Newtonian language and logical positivism of the old physical sciences that are not consistent with new ideas about the nature of reality and of life. As a result, there is a loosely coupled set of ideas and findings that indicate some fundamental transitions in our thinking about a new administrative science (Overman, 1996). These new sciences demand an examination of old assumptions, and the application of new perspectives. This paper is an attempt to distinguish the phenomenon of 'leadership' from the activities, functions, and relationships often labeled as leadership by those who have not carefully considered that there should be a distinction.

The scientific approach to understanding leadership

Scientific study is accomplished by the creation of a metaphysical canon of consistency used primarily for structuring research and for developing educational curricula to perpetuate the study (Harré, 1970; Kuhn, 1970). The canon of industrial-era leadership theories is an adaptation of the hierarchical view of the universe adopted by the early Christian Church, and presumes that leadership is all about the person at the top of the hierarchy, this person's exceptional qualities and abilities to manage the structure of the hierarchy, and the activities of this person in relation to goal achievement. This canon has been incorporated into pragmatic application of theory.

The canon of any discipline is the conceptual basis for the professional language, and is founded in specific metaphysical assumptions that are defended and perpetuated as the 'truth' or *conventional knowledge* (Harré, 1970). As with any model of science, the language used to discuss leadership consists of specific descriptive terms that are designed to regulate the discipline by copying or representing a particular paradigm – terms such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, charismatic leadership, and strategic leadership. Each of these descriptive terms perpetuates the dominant paradigm by indicating some variation of the industrial model of leadership.

Social sciences have developed with many of the fundamental assumptions about reality used in the physical sciences (Harré et al., 1985). The ultimate purpose of social science is to predict behavior. To facilitate prediction, Cartesian science assumes the existence of mechanistic, deterministic, cause-effect relationships that can be replicated in equivalent circumstances because they follow immutable laws. These relationships depend for their analysis upon distinctions between subjects and objects. It makes no sense to discuss one thing causing another unless the two 'things' can be distinguished. Two 'things' are distinguished by the nature of their substance; they have distinctive properties.

The problem of studying the properties of complex and continuous social processes lies in an inevitable error made by the human mind when it contemplates conceptual elements of a continuous phenomenon rather than the whole (Tolstoy, 1952: Book 11, Chapter 1). The error is made with the assumption that each conceptual increment of the phenomenon has a beginning and an end, which necessarily separates them by a boundary. Analysis of such discrete elements fails to account for their inherent connections, and does not abide their continuous nature.

Leadership, as we experience it, is a continuous social process. But industrial leadership studies are usually conducted by isolating a single event or a bounded series of events as though this event has a definable beginning and end, and by analysing as though this element is subject to cause-effect relationships. There are two errors inherent in the studies of leadership described by Bass (1990). The first error is the assumption that an analysis of a collection of these discrete events is equivalent to an analysis of continuous leadership. The second error of this leadership study is the assumption that the actions of one person (king, CEO, advocate, etc.) are the equivalent of many individual wills and the cause of outcomes. Both these errors result directly from the application of empirical methods to the study of leadership.

Empiricism begins with a direct observation, which is to say that it begins with a human perception of a phenomenon. If an instrument is used, the properties of the phenomenon are verified by a perception of data supplied by the instrument. Observations do not exist independent of the observer (Pirsig, 1991). A direct observation is necessarily founded in a particular *value* that is experienced before the observation itself or any abstract intellectualization or analysis can begin. Some value, for example, is behind the observer's attention to the phenomenon in the first place.

To illustrate the role of values in empirical science, Pirsig (1991) used the example of a scientist sitting on a hot stove. Regardless of the scientist's philosophical persuasion, the scientist will jump off the hot stove and exclaim

some oaths, thus declaring that the phenomenon has negative value. The declaration of negative value is not a metaphysical abstraction, or a subjective judgement, or a description of a subjective experience; it is a predictable, verifiable, empirical observation. In other words, the *value* is present before the 'observation' takes place. According to Pirsig, the value lies between the stove and the exclamation. The scientist's behavior is more likely caused by the value than by the stove, but in any case the reality of causation is constructed after the phenomenon occurs. Empirical observations are perceptions of value.

Substance apart from its properties cannot be proven to exist; substance is what it is experienced to be (Locke, 1947). Substance is verified through human perception of patterns of data. Pirsig suggested that we strike the term *substance* and instead use the phrase *stable pattern of value*. Rather than using properties of substance to distinguish a 'thing' like leadership from other things, one can use a pattern of value to make the same distinction and to establish the reality of the 'thing'. The essential nature of leadership can be determined through patterns of value, both stable and dynamic. Patterns of value are contained within and defined by conventional knowledge.

The role of convention in the study and practice of leadership

Conventional knowledge is the common rationality as applied to human actions within a cultural milieu (Giddens, 1987). As with all other constructs, the understanding of leadership as applied to industrial society depends upon conventional 'theories' to support its internal integrity, and to establish its truth. Mainstream leadership study is designed to establish the conventional knowledge needed by actors in this specific social system. Leadership scholars discuss The Four Is, or Transformational Leadership, or Leader-Member Exchange theory, and practitioners adopt the roles specified within these models as the correct approach to the practice of leadership.

But, conventional understanding of leadership has been systematically constructed from other conventional knowledge about social hierarchies, and about their command and control structures. This knowledge is then used to validate leadership theories without further critical analysis. The development of leadership 'truth' has been a cyclical process of using convention that has been the source of development also as the source of validation.

Mainstream leadership scholars most consistently agree upon one thing: leaders are supposed to 'motivate' followers/subordinates to accomplish organizational goals. House and Aditya (1997) summarized the history of leadership study, discussing different approaches to assessing the leader's

ability to motivate subordinates, but without addressing specific sources of motivation. Most theories of motivation attribute that which energizes and sustains behavior to internally experienced needs. Many leadership theories cited by House and Aditya hold that it is the leader's job to orient and/or to satisfy those needs in such a way as to extract the desired goal-oriented behavior from subordinates. The assumption that leaders can manipulate subordinate motivation, and the recommendations for accomplishing that manipulation, probably oversimplify the whole issue of motivational forces, but they are exemplary of conventional ideas that place the leader in control of outcomes. The simple assertion that the leader is responsible for achieving goals is used to verify the leader's involvement in motivation.

House and Aditya did not attempt to establish a definition of leadership, but concluded with the following statement: 'A problem with current leadership study is that it continues to focus excessively on superior-subordinate relationships to the exclusion of several functions that leaders perform and to the exclusion of organizational and environmental variables that are crucial to effective leadership performance' (p. 460). While these authors are attempting to stimulate new approaches to leadership study, in this rather typical statement they reinforce the key elements of conventional leadership wisdom: (a) leadership is all about the leaders and their 'functions' in the organization, (b) leadership is the sum total of the leader's performance, and (c) performance is the result of some characteristics of the leader vis-a-vis conditions of the environment.

The aim of industrial leadership is to serve institutional needs. Pursuant to this aim, knowledge of institutions has been one source for the development of leadership theory. Unlike critical philosophy, critical history, or critical science, leadership theories have not generally been examined for anything other than the extent of their contribution toward their aim. In this way, they constitute conventional knowledge, but not a science.

The pursuit of institutional needs proceeds under the presumption that the satisfied institution ultimately will meet individual wants and needs. Conventional experience of leadership is thought to be consistent with the degree to which a given individual experiences the satisfaction of needs. But the study of leadership tends to overlook the effect of the potential dichotomy between individual needs and institutional needs. In fact, the dichotomy itself is seen as a 'leadership challenge'. One goal for industrial leaders is to persuade 'followers' to replace their desire to pursue individual needs with the desire to pursue institutional needs. Further, institutional 'leaders' have slowly but surely facilitated a deterioration of an individual's ability to meet his or her own needs independent of institutions.

Given that many leadership scholars do not define leadership (Rost,

1991), they must necessarily be relying upon conventional knowledge to assess the validity of 'leadership' activities. Those who act out 'leadership' need not fully understand the minutia of convention to be in a position to contribute to this validation. Giddens (1987) used the example of writing a check to demonstrate the possibility of acting within the boundaries and with knowledge of convention without necessarily understanding it completely. One does not need to have an elaborate understanding of the banking system to have and to use a checking account. Further, asked about conventional ideas, actors are rarely able to articulate them; we all know what money is until someone asks us to define it specifically. We all know what leadership is until someone asks us to define it specifically.

When one writes a check, one does so within the context of a complex array of concepts about what credit is, what account balance is, and so on. Those who act out leadership do so armed with an array of concepts about what work is, what justice is, what success is, what cooperation is, what goals are, what responsibility is, and so forth. If someone were to act out leadership with different concepts, such as a different cultural definition of success or of responsibility, then a different construct of leadership could be expected to govern the assessment of action.

Leadership research in its traditional form is ultimately a ponderous confirmation of conventional knowledge and little else. Whether leadership study is intended to be a marketing tool or is simply the hapless result of unscrutinized conventional dogma, its future is changing.

Conventional knowledge about leadership

In his *Handbook of leadership*, Bass (1990) organized the work on leadership study into eight sections. The first section includes various concepts, definitions, and theories of leadership. Each concept is presented, some are related to each other, but none is developed to indicate a conceptual framework or theme for the remainder of the book. There is no discussion of metaphysical foundations for leadership study or any attempt to clarify a definition. The first section gives a brief look at famous people in history, behavior of animals (pecking order and such), and sets the tone for the remainder of the book by insisting that 'leaders do make a difference' (p. 8).

The second section is devoted to personal attributes of leaders. The third considers power and legitimacy, but the consideration emphasizes the leader's skill or ability to manage power and conflict rather than presenting power and conflict as a contextual issue. The fourth is about transactional exchange, where leadership is understood as the result of exchanges of valued

things and leaders are defined by their ability to bargain. The fifth is about leadership and management style, and centers upon the personal values and activities of the person in charge. The sixth discusses situational moderators, but these moderators are viewed as things that enhance or inhibit elements of a leader's style and not as a general context for leadership or social processes to develop. The seventh is about diverse groups, but it is more about individual (cultural) differences in leadership style than about what leadership might mean in different cultures. The final section is about leadership study in the future and will be discussed later.

Bass legitimized and defended conventional knowledge about the industrial paradigm of leadership. The industrial paradigm of leadership, as described by Rost (1991), is based in an obsession with the persona of kings and conquerors that can be traced at least as far back as Biblical times. Until the Age of Enlightenment, people thought that 'the anointed one' in charge was actually ordained by God. For Thomas Aquinas (1952), unquestioning obedience to those in authority was a moral obligation because God had given them power.

In the early 16th century, the church condemned Machiavelli (1514/1981) because he removed leadership from the realm of God and placed it within the sphere of human activities, thereby setting the stage for industrial theories of leadership. He had carefully examined the behavior of princes and circumstances surrounding successful and unsuccessful principalities to create a theory of leadership. Machiavelli's audacity was to suggest that common people could become princes by virtue of their abilities and through the skillful application of specific principles: the successful leader:

. . . must have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization, and its discipline. The art of war is all that is expected of a ruler; and it is so useful that besides enabling hereditary princes to maintain their rule it frequently enables ordinary citizens to become rulers.

(p. 87)

The essential theme of waging war is still evident in conventional leadership theory. Its order is centered about an image of a powerful, male-like leader who sits atop a hierarchical structure and who controls all outcomes that emanate from that structure. The leader's power is thought to be based in knowledge, control, and the ability to win (war). The leader's will is imposed through the direct or indirect threat of violence. In the industrial world, violence is often economic in nature, relating to the acquisition of market share, and financial and material assets.

Since the time of Machiavelli, leadership theorists have incorporated dimensions of context and of 'followers,' but for the most part they have sought an explanation of leadership as the relationship between the persona (abilities, traits, characteristics, and actions) of the 'man in charge', and the outcomes of the social milieu within which 'he' appears to operate (his governance). This presumed cause-effect relationship is the source of conventional knowledge about leadership. On the one hand, trait theories are often criticized as inadequate means for understanding leadership (Bass, 1981; Bennis, 1959; Mintzberg, 1982; Rost, 1991; Stogdill, 1948), while on the other hand leadership scholars are flailing away at mounds of traits. In one survey of the literature, Fleishman et al. (1991) listed 499 traits or dimensions of leader behavior from 65 different systems.

Kotter (1988) defined leadership as 'the process of moving a group (or groups) of people in some direction through (mostly) noncoercive means' (p. 16). Kotter acknowledged that the word *leadership* sometimes refers to people who occupy the roles where leadership by the first definition is expected. Kotter then characterized 'good' or 'effective' leadership as a process that 'moves people in a direction that is genuinely in their real long-term best interests' (p. 17). As an example of effective leadership, Kotter chose Lee Iacocca. His rationale for this choice was Iacocca's apparent role in 'an extraordinarily dramatic and very impressive turnaround' (p. 17).

Despite Kotter's use of the word *process* in his definition, he was clearly relying upon a great man doing great things to verify his construct. In addition, if effective leadership moves people toward their own best interests, then we are left to assume that the 'processes' at Chrysler during the Iacocca era mobilized organizational activities and resources toward pursuit of the best interests of all of its employees. If leadership is fundamentally non-coercive, then we can be assured that these employees cheerfully carried out their organizational assignments with vivid images, perhaps even direct experience, of their common good.

The argument against questioning such applications of conventional knowledge is similar to that used in other institutionalized disciplines: any theoretical development that does not pay homage to the narrative or empirical traditions in the field is not valid. One hundred years of leadership theory development based upon the assumption that leadership is necessarily a function of the persona of the leader cannot be summarily dismissed, so the argument goes, because this development has been the result of sincere and thoughtful effort by brilliant and capable scholars.

But the most sincere and thoughtful scholarship can be dismissed if its foundation assumptions are contradictory, poorly supported, or simply wrong. For example, several hundred years' worth of sincere scholarship was

founded on the assumption that the earth was the center of the universe. Just as geocentric theory was based in the understandable but incorrect perception of the sun and stars circling the earth, leadership theory has been based in the understandable but incorrect perception of a direct cause-effect relationship between the leader's abilities, traits, actions and leadership outcomes.

When leadership is defined, the definition usually addresses the nature of the *leader*, and not the nature of *leadership*. For example, Wills (1994), after a lengthy discussion of what *leadership* is about, why *leadership* is important, and what *leadership* concerns, boldly declared 'it is time for a definition: the leader is one who mobilizes others toward a goal shared by leaders and followers' (p. 17). This definition, incidently, was not developed further, but taken to be self-evident.

The assumption that the leader is the source of leadership also implies that the leader is defined by position in a hierarchy: 'There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as *servant*, was in fact the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble *leader*' (Greenleaf, 1995: 19, emphasis in original). This statement about the plot of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* was used by Greenleaf to illustrate how he concluded that leaders are servants first. Greenleaf suggested that Leo was a great leader because of a particular trait; he was 'by nature a servant' (p. 19). But, even when he was the servant, 'Leo was actually the leader all of the time' (p. 19). While leaders may practice humility, they are still presumed to be in charge. Attempts to refute the assumption of hierarchy only serve to confuse the issue: 'Leadership is, as you know, not a position but a job' (DePree, 1992: 7).

While, some time ago, traits were thought to be insufficient to explain leadership (Stogdill, 1948), they have made a comeback as a primary explanation of leadership (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Gemmill and Oakley likened the fascination with traits to a 'ghost dance' intended to restore and to prevent disintegration of a civilization that is slipping away. Alarm about a 'lack of leadership' is a sign of increasing social despair and massive learned helplessness.

Kirkpatrick and Locke identified six traits they believe differentiate leaders from other people: drive, motivation, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability, and knowledge of business. The assumption behind this form of research is that people will change their personalities and world views to adopt these traits and to become successful leaders (Rost, 1993). But, as Rost pointed out, the traits and abilities that presumably identify an effective leader cannot be substantially differentiated from those that define an effective manager, or an effective person. How can we be sure these are the right traits? Do people who do not have these traits become

effective leaders? What about Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi? Both these individuals have been identified by Bennis and Nanus (1985), Burns (1978), and others as successful leaders. But, were FDR's honesty and integrity substantially higher than everyone else's? Of what business did Gandhi have intimate knowledge? Further, when did scholars who identified these traits know they were measuring the traits of leaders? Did the identification of leaders take place first by virtue of position or of success, or did a comprehensive measurement of traits indicate who might be correctly evaluated as a leader?

In the first four pages of their book, in or around a section proposing a 'new theory' of leadership, Bennis and Nanus (1985) identified 22 historic figures as great leaders. Like many others, Bennis and Nanus defined leadership by defining characteristics and activities of the leader. On page 5, they stated flatly that the great man theories of leadership failed to explain leadership, but, throughout their book, they used CEOs and famous people as examples of good leadership.

Bass (1990), in the eighth section of his tome, acknowledged new paradigms in leadership thinking:

Recent developments in the mathematics of dealing with irregularities, reversals in trends, and seemingly chaotic conditions may be applied to modeling the natural discontinuities in leader-follower relationships. The physical sciences may suggest new ways of looking at short-lived phenomena, for example, the emergence of instant leadership in a crisis followed by its equally instant disappearance. The willingness to accept two distinctive ways of dealing with the same phenomenon, as is common in wave and particle physics, may lead leadership theorists to treat simultaneously the leader's and subordinates' different rationales for what is happening. Cause-and-effect analysis may be seen as the exception to mutual interactions between leader and group outcomes.
(p. 882)

Following this rather close encounter with the metaphysics of science, Bass declared 'in the new paradigm, the transformational leader moved the followers to transcend their own interests for the good of the group, organization, or society . . . transformational leaders, like charismatics, attract strong feelings of identification from their subordinates' (p. 902). Bass presented this statement as the view for the 21st century. His statement of 'the new paradigm' still clings to the idea that leadership is about leaders supervising subordinates, about subordinates working hard toward institutional objectives as the primary goal for leadership, and about the leader's ability

to persuade/inspire/motivate subordinates to release their own needs to work toward the interests of the leader or the institution that the leader represents.

Another golden opportunity to examine conventional knowledge of the study of leadership and to explore the new paradigm was handed to Yukl and Van Fleet (1992). In the second edition of Marvin Dunnette's *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*, Yukl and Van Fleet wrote the section on theory and research in leadership. They began the section with an overview of the literature, with 'an emphasis on recent trends and developments likely to dominate the field through the turn of the century' (p. 148). They acknowledged that 'some theorists believe that leadership is inherent in the social influence processes occurring among members of a group or organization, and leadership is a collective process shared among the members' (p. 148). But they chose to adopt the opposing view 'that all groups have role specialization, including a specialized leadership role wherein one person has more influence than other members and carries out some leadership functions that cannot be shared without jeopardizing the success of the group's mission' (p. 148).

The implication of the view adopted by Yukl and Van Fleet is that the group's mission is the same as organizational objectives. If the mission were truly their own, all group members could be trusted to pursue it without jeopardy. While it is possible for the group to develop its own mission, little discussion was devoted to that possibility. This assumption regarding the source of mission determines whether research will center on the attributes, skills, abilities, and actions of a single leader carrying out assignments, or on reciprocal influence processes and integrative functions performed by a variety of people in the organization.

Yukl and Van Fleet's response to the general criticism of scholars who do not define leadership was the following:

Definitions are somewhat arbitrary, and controversies about the best way to define leadership usually cause confusion and animosity rather than providing new insights into the nature of the process. At this point in the development of the field, it is not necessary to resolve the controversy over the appropriate definition of leadership.

(p. 149)

So, rather than causing confusion and animosity, the authors chose to present the 'theories' developed over the past century and the best way to validate those theories through research methodology without defining the 'thing' that is being studied. If definitions are arbitrary, it is only because they have not been developed or supported.

Despite their reluctance to cause controversy, Yukl and Van Fleet offered this as an undeveloped definition: 'Leadership is viewed as a process that includes influencing the task objectives and strategies of a group or organization, influencing people in the organization to implement the strategies and achieve the objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of the organization' (p. 149). The authors added that they would use the terms leadership and management interchangeably throughout their discussion without reference to the various arguments that they are different 'things' to define and to study (further discussion of differences can be found in Barker, 1997). Therefore, the 'new' theory of leadership, according to Yukl and Van Fleet, is founded on the assumption that leadership is all about influencing people to perform tasks and to implement strategies to, as Rost (1991) has nicely put it, do the leader's wishes, and that leadership is the same as management. This view of leadership is conventional.

The most recent books and articles on leadership claiming to offer new perspectives generally do not show much deviation from convention. Most books with the word *leadership* in the title are either self-help books, promoting self-efficacy labeled as leadership, or pop management books that agree with Yukl and Van Fleet that leadership and management are the same thing. For example, the book *Virtual leadership*, by Kostner (1994) is a novel about a modern 'project leader' who is charged with extracting performance out of a geographically distributed work team. He is mentored by 'the most legendary multi-site leader of all time - King Arthur of Camelot' (p. 1), and achieves business success upon the advice of a medieval king. While the book has many valuable management insights, it is a paragon of feudal wisdom, and provides nothing beyond conventional thinking.

Leadership and the new science by Wheatley (1994) fulfills its promise of an application of the new science, but the application is directed toward management. The word *leadership* is rarely mentioned outside the title, much less defined.

More typical is a book edited by Shelton (1997) entitled *A new paradigm of leadership* that contains 54 sections written by different authors - some well-known leadership scholars, some practitioners. Each section is a collection of tips on how to manage organizations, and how to get employees to do what the boss wants them to do to achieve higher levels of performance. No section offers a definition of leadership.

Scholastic journal articles tend to follow the same line of conventional thinking. Sparrowe and Liden (1997) insisted that 'leaders form different types of exchange relationships with their subordinates' (p. 522). Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX), as exemplified in this article, is

focused on the ability of the leader to extract member performance by skillful exchange of valued things. The focus of this article is on exchange behavior relative to job assignments. While leadership is not defined, leaders are characterized as those who socialize and orient members in the ways of institutional needs.

A discussion of 'international leadership' by Peterson and Hunt (1997) focused on international and multicultural perceptions of leaders and heroes. While the discussion raises some important issues regarding the generalization of what is largely ethnocentric social science conducted in the US, there is no basis presented for a definition of leadership, and leadership is assumed to be a function of how leaders conduct themselves in different cultural settings.

Pawar and Eastman (1997) claim in the title of their article to be providing a conceptual examination of transformational leadership, but they limit their discussion to the top level of the organization and to the CEO's ability to create and to manage change. Leadership is not defined, but is characterized as a mechanism for accomplishing goals: 'The transformational leader effects organizational change through the articulation of the leader's vision, the acceptance of the vision by followers, and the creation of a congruence between followers' self-interests and the vision' (p. 82). The successful transformational leader finds a way to convince followers to align their self-interests and subsequent actions with organizational structure and goals.

One approach to leadership study that initially appeared promising was the formulation of 'democratic leadership' by Kurt Lewin (1950). Lewin was attempting to establish a substantive distinction among authoritarian leadership, democratic leadership, and laissez-faire management. Unfortunately, Lewin and his colleagues ended their exploration with leader style, as a characteristic of the leader, and seem to have done more to define management than to define leadership. Subsequent exploration of the same idea has been confounded by the need for measurable variables, even though it has popular support by those who value democracy.

A more comprehensive explanation of democratic leadership was conducted by Gastil (1994), who adopted Lewin's central idea that democratic leadership is the outcome of the influence of the leader's behavior on people in a manner consistent with democratic principles. Gastil's elaboration of this idea included the relationship between authority and leadership, the functions of democratic leadership, the distribution of leadership, the roles of democratic followers, and the appropriate settings for democratic leadership. Aside from the old assumptions that leadership is a function of the leader and that democratic leadership is one of many styles that can be applied or

not by choice, there is some ancient baggage that prevents this idea from being viable as a process explanation of leadership outcomes.

Ancient Greece was the birthplace of modern administrative thinking, and specifically associated with democracy. Plato implanted the idea that democracy is dangerous because the hegemony of *demos* would disrupt all classes of society (Takala, 1998). Plato was certain that a class structure in society with a ruling class of philosopher-kings would be the preferable alternative. Democracy invites change that Plato felt would interfere with the structure of society and would threaten the continuity of justice. As a counter to Athenian democracy as it existed, Plato promoted the transcendental abilities of the philosopher-king, who is possessed of magical skills and of superhuman wisdom. In short, modern leadership theory, even the theory of democratic leadership, is still attempting to make a case for Plato's philosopher-king.

A different approach

The relationship between action and structure must be mitigated by, what Giddens (1982) called, *the duality of structure*. Structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcomes of the practices and activities that comprise those systems. The complex, reciprocal relationships of people and institutions, then, must be the foci of the explanation of leadership. The duality of structure ultimately connects that which constitutes the leader and that which creates outcomes in a way that cannot be explained by defining the leader.

There is a difference between what we have defined as leadership and what we experience as leadership (Rost, 1991). Burns (1978) expressed the belief that the experience of leadership is centered on a striving to satisfy our mutual wants and needs. Are these wants and needs mutual among human beings, or is the mutuality we expect between human beings and social institutions?

A new framework for leadership studies can be built upon a direct, phenomenological experience of leadership that occurs prior to the creation or adaptation of conventional knowledge. Instead of cause-effect relationships, this experience can be assessed through value preferences. As opposed to the view, for example, that leader authenticity (A) causes morale (B), one can hold the view that followers value authentic leaders. Instead of A causing B, B prefers a precondition of A; B may go in some other direction (Pirsig, 1991).

Value is understood beyond preferential relationships as the source of

those relationships. The question for leadership study is *what motivates people to modify their self-interest to work collectively toward common goals?* The conventional answer is to identify the leader as the source of motivation, or, if not the source, at least the stimulus. But, motivation is thought by most motivation theorists to be internally generated by needs. So, does that mean the source of leadership is internal?

The context of leadership

Hunt (1991) purported to offer a new synthesis – an extended model – of leadership. The discussion focused upon an analysis of the context of leadership, but developed no foundation for a definition. Given the context, leadership was divided into three domains: systems leadership (top level), organizational leadership (intermediate level), and direct leadership (bottom level). The extensive analysis of ‘immensely complex environmental and societal–culture/values forces facing leaders at the highest levels’ (p. 27) was impressive, but did not employ a metaphysical framework sufficient to organize an understanding of that complexity. In a large sense, the discussion of the context was bounded by assumptions that the leader is the source of leadership, and that the context is an obstacle with which the leader must cope. Indeed, Chapter 6 was devoted to the individual background factors and capabilities needed by leaders to cope with contextual issues.

Contemplation of the context of leadership is confounded by the same reductionism that has confounded physical science. Physical science is thought to be understandable only if all phenomena are reduced to the same level of inquiry (Jantsch, 1980). Reductionism depends upon a spatial structure where pieces can be disassembled and then reassembled. The structure is understood when key relationships among various combinations of components or subsystems are discovered. This view assumes that micro-systems are simply sub-systems of macro-systems, and that the latter is an unchanging ‘environment’ of the former. In order to make sense of micro-systems, the macro-system must be static or stable. If the macro-system changes, micro-systems are disrupted. Key relationships within a micro-system cannot be influenced by change in the macro-system, or they become different relationships.

Leader-centered theories of leadership are reductionistic; the leader represents a micro-system, and the task is to explain the nature of the leader – disassembling and reassembling the leader, if you will. The ‘environment’ of leadership, then, is some form of social milieu, such as a society, an organization, or a small group that has specific influences upon how the leader formulates leadership. These theories depend for their integrity on stable and

consistent measurements of both the macro- and micro-systems; it is presumed that relationships among system components (traits, abilities, actions, etc.) are established within a stable environment. A change in the environment will require new definitions (or at least reverification) of these relationships.

Social systems are not static systems, and are not likely to remain stable for long periods of time. To begin with, people in a large social system can influence each other if they never meet, or if they have no knowledge of each other's existence. An accounting of this form of relationship is not possible by traditional measurements of group parameters. In addition, not all properties of macro-systems necessarily follow from the properties of their sub-systems or components – it cannot be stated that outcomes in society are properties of leadership. Rather, some properties of macro-systems are the result of dynamic interactions with sub-systems; they change at the same time, and sometimes in unpredictable ways. Reductionism does not account for these dynamic interactions. Therefore, studies of social process, like leadership, must be approached upon different levels of inquiry.

Jantsch (1980) distinguished three levels of inquiry that are irreducible to each other: (a) classical or Newtonian dynamics, (b) an equilibrium-seeking systems model based in laws of thermodynamics, and (c) dissipative structures. Newtonian science operates under an assumption of purity and exclusivity – behavior can be isolated and studied without reference to other entities. It is this view of systems that has predominated leadership studies in particular, and management theory and social science in general. The universe (macro-system) and all of its sub-systems are thought to be stable, orderly, and predictable. It is presumed that control of the system or organization can be attained through the measurement of phenomena and the prediction of change. Change can be made predictable even if it is not mechanistic because it can be minimized or incrementalized through measurement and control. Leadership, within this view of change, is characterized as mechanistic, linear, predictable, and subject to definition through numeric constants. The stability of the classical system (as applied to organizations) is accomplished through the imposition of structure and standard operating procedures that are assumed to provide the organization with stability and the leader with control. Taylor (1911), Weber (1947), and others have applied the classical system to management and to theories of administration because it provides some degree of certainty.

A thermodynamic system is always evolving toward a state of equilibrium, which in turn provides the sole reference point for defining the system. The origin and extinction of an equilibrium-seeking system are determined by some degree of disruption which causes the system to change energy levels. A key concept of the thermodynamic system is *entropy*. Entropy is a complex

idea that is used to explain the conservation of energy. Thermodynamic systems increase their entropy when they lose energy, or when energy becomes unavailable for work. In organizations, entropy results from disruption, and managers seek out sources of entropy for correction.

The equilibrium-seeking, or structure-preserving, organization is one in which certainty and stability are important goals, but complete stability or control is not expected because some degree of change that will result in energy loss is either unpredictable or uncontrollable. spurts of dynamic change are thought to be contained within predictable patterns of variation. Leadership is assumed to be centered, rather than in linear control, in some form of stable or predictable oscillation. For this type of system, unpredictable change (loss of energy) is assumed to be continuous, and is met by managers with adaptation and with reorientation. Managers tend to assume that change is incremental in nature, and that adaptation or minimizing energy loss can be facilitated through sequential shifting of structure.

A dissipative (transforming or chaotic) system is defined by a 'spontaneous formation of structures in open systems which exchange energy and matter with their environment' (Jantsch, 1980: 26). There are three characteristics: (1) they are open to the environment, (2) they are far from equilibrium, and (3) they necessarily include autocatalytic steps. The dissipative system can release entropy to its environment, and can dissipate or self-energize. The 'accounting' for entropy must include the environment. The environment changes with the micro-system in a mutually influencing way. The 'structure' of a dissipative system is not a solid, tangible structure, but a process structure: what Jantsch referred to as a dynamic regime.

Technically, chaotic systems can only be defined statistically by identifying discontinuous collections of data points on a graph, called strange attractors (Kiel, 1994). The presence of strange attractors signals that the system is chaotic and not random. As applied to leadership or to theories of management and administration, chaos theory should be understood as metaphorical and not statistical. Still, the term *chaos* can be misleading. One application of chaos theory to management is deterministic, in the sense of classical and thermodynamic models. This view provides managers with answers to problems and methods for finding those answers. Another view is what Overman (1996) called *quantum administration*. The quantum view holds that reality emerges from a perception of the changing order, and that what managers do to obtain an answer will influence the nature of the answer. 'Quantum administration is a world with different foci: on energy, not matter; on becoming, not being; on coincidence, not causes; on constructivism, not determinism; and on new states of awareness and consciousness' (p. 489).

Chaos theory is the study of complex, deterministic, nonlinear, dynamic systems (Kellert, 1993). Dissipative or transforming change is very complex, very dynamic, and necessarily discontinuous. A system is transforming when the existing structures of the system dissipate and transform into new forms or structures. Within this dynamic system, there is an internal capacity to reconfigure in response to gradual or to sudden change whether it is predicted or not. This internal capacity is not necessarily correlated with any given set of consistently identifiable or measurable variables. A dissipative system continuously renews itself within a dynamic context.

Rather than seeking to preserve its structure in some form, the transforming system evolves into new modes of operation, new orders of structure, and new relationships with its environment. Reorganizing a hierarchical (organizational) structure into a new hierarchy is not necessarily a transformation. If an anthill is leveled and a new one built, the result is not a transformation but merely an adaptation to change. Two key differences that distinguish the transforming system are that this system (a) is not organized by strategic, rational thought, and (b) responds to change not as a disruptive irregularity, but as an integral element of the environment. If the ants sprouted wings and moved to the trees instead of rebuilding in the ground, the result would be a transformation.

A quick illustration of the relationship of these three levels of inquiry to leader-centered views of leadership can be made by using the analogy of a person carrying a bowl of water. In the classical system, the leader's role is to minimize the disturbance or ripples in the bowl. In order to minimize ripples, the leader will change as little as possible to maximize control. There is an implicit assumption that the leader can isolate the elements of the system, avoid outside interference and disruptive change, and maintain stability through prediction and control. A bowl of ripples is thought, within this view, to indicate an incompetent leader.

If the system is equilibrium-seeking, the leader's role then is to be reactionary and adaptive in nature – goal oriented, but driven to some extent by changing environmental demands, like a changing market or a changing technology. The equilibrium system is a deterministic system that is acknowledged to be subject to unavoidable and commonly unanticipated disturbances from outside (and perhaps from inside) the system. The person in charge must change to meet demands for action, but is still focused on stabilizing the system as much as possible because equilibrium is still considered to be the desired state of existence for the system. Here, our water carrier is moving rapidly to keep up, while being jostled from all sides, trying to minimize the amount of water lost from the bowl. An unacceptable level of loss will signal the extinction of the system, and is thought to indicate an incompetent leader.

In the transforming system, the leader's role cannot be defined in advance, but emerges from the dissipative or transforming processes. The bowl of water is expelled into the air, and whatever comes down is fundamentally and structurally different from what it was before; this is transformation. In the transforming system, there cannot be any form of control, any theory of prediction, or any form of measurable constant (such as traits, structures, and so forth) as determinants of leadership. In fact, in a transforming system, whatever we experience as leadership is itself transforming as a part of the system; the macro-system changes as a part of the transformation. Therefore, it makes little sense to discuss any constant quality of the leader as the source of leadership. While chaotic systems may be known and managed by way of experience (Overman, 1996), leadership in a transforming system may not be associated with any form of deliberate control or pre-selected specific goals for outcomes. Part of understanding chaos theory is perceiving organizational phenomena within new frameworks, and using a new language to order and to communicate those perceptions.

Imagine a carnival. There are various attractions set up in a structured way, but the crowd responds to the structure of the environment by creating, dissolving, and recreating its own structure. While the structure of the attractions has influence on the crowd, its patterns are influenced by the direct application of value. From a single vantage point, the crowd appears chaotic sometimes and orderly at other times. As different attractions change activity levels, lines form and then dissipate and reform somewhere else. Taken as a whole, the crowd appears to be a mass of people milling about randomly. But careful observation will reveal groupings of people waxing and waning in what may eventually become predictable patterns of structure. This predictability is not the result of a priori, cause-effect relationships, but emerges from collected observations of the results of applied values over time. The patterns formed at any one time eventually change in form, not mechanistically but organically; they do not shift, they bloom. The people in motion are reciprocally linked to the context within which they move, and their movement can adequately be explained only by referring to the values they apply to the choices of movement they make. The values governing movement of people in the crowd are energized to some extent by qualities of the environment: displays, pitches, activity, etc.

A ready example contrasting two levels of inquiry might be found in what is commonly called *military leadership*. Wills (1994), in his discussion of military leadership, used Napoleon as an example of a military leader, and George McClellan as an example of an antitype. Wills obviously assumed that any person holding the title of *General* must necessarily be assessed as a military leader. While Napoleon was clearly a good military combat general,

McClellan did not satisfy anyone's definition of a combat general. McClellan was good at organizing the military and preparing it for combat. In fact, some historians have suggested that the success of the Army of the Potomac was due at least in part to McClellan's skill at preparation (Foote, 1958).

If any social context can be described as a linear system, military training fits that description. Military drills are very highly structured, as is military life in general. If any context can be described as a transforming system, combat can be, as any combat soldier will verify. Wills seems to have unwittingly distinguished management from a classical system perspective from what leadership might be as experienced in a transforming system. While he recognized that one differed from the other, he did not adopt a framework or a language suitable for explaining the difference. Leadership has much more to do with action based upon perceptions of emerging structure in systems where order is periodically breaking down and reforming than it does with the imposition of structure and control relative to an a priori configuration. The 'leader' has no more influence on the emerging structure than the carnival barker has on the crowd.

At this point, it is possible to make a few tentative statements about the context of leadership: (1) leadership is more likely to be associated with a transforming or chaotic system than with a classical system – leadership is not about control; (2) the context of leadership as a dissipative system is irreducible – knowing the system does not mean that its elements are known (Jantsch, 1980); (3) the context of leadership is irreversible – progressive and not repetitive (Overman, 1996); (4) the higher level order in the leadership process may be perceived only by a few individuals, and perhaps by no one; (5) leadership, like perceived order, emerges from the system; (6) micro-systems, such as organizations or leaders themselves, exchange energy with their environment and cannot be understood apart from the macro-system. Process and not structure is the vessel of leadership; chaos and complexity are not problems to be solved, they are the engines of evolution, adaptation, and renewal.

The nature of leadership

'To study the laws of history, we must completely change the subject of our observation; must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common and infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved' (Tolstoy, 1952: 470). The infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved are their individual wills – their personal values, their needs, or more specifically their ethics. An ethic (from the Greek word *ethos*) is a foundation of values that defines one's character and provides individuals with a sense of purpose and direction. Ethics are spiritual definitions of life that, for

the individual, answer the question of *my needs* or 'what is life's greatest good?' Morals (from the Latin word *mos*) are customs and behavioral standards that patronize *society's needs*, or what one should do to fulfill one's purpose and to bring about life's greatest good. This distinction between ethics and morals – between *my needs* and *society's needs* – is crucial to understanding the difference between structure and energy in social systems.

Leadership scholars have been searching for structures to predict and to control, and not for dynamic value (energy). Dynamic value in social processes is created by spontaneously varying combinations of individual values. Structures in society emerge from dynamic value, and may in turn be swallowed up again. The values of individuals influence collective values, which then reciprocate; ethics create mores, which in turn create ethics – people meeting their own needs create institutions which are supposed to meet individual needs. Dynamic change in a classical system is thought to be a deviation from normal static patterns, and becomes something to be explained and controlled. But, in a self-organizing system, unpredicted and dynamic change is the essential composition of the system.

Although dissipative systems are unpredictable, they obey rules. Specifically, the rules are established through some principle of self-organization and they create the internal consistency that differentiates chaotic systems from random behavior. The basis for evolution within these systems is a balance between generation and degeneration, and between deviation and convention. The function of a dissipative system embraces its processes as they unfold when its function is self-renewal. Leadership scholars have always assumed that a 'vision' or goal must be present first before the processes are shaped toward the achievement of the goal. Perhaps it would be more instructive to take the position that the 'vision' emerges, at least in part, out of the dynamics of the unfolding processes.

While management can be understood as an activity of building, leadership must be understood as a process of unfolding. Building has as its goal the creation of hierarchical structure from bottom to top–top to bottom. 'Unfolding, in contrast, implies the interweaving of processes which lead simultaneously to phenomena of structuration at different hierarchical levels' (Jantsch, 1980: 75). What we experience as leadership is a process that organizes discontinuous cycles of energy exchanges that extend through the social milieu.

Leadership defined

Defining leadership as a social process is certainly not a new idea. Gemmill and Oakley (1992) defined leadership as 'a process of dynamic collaboration,

where individuals and organization members authorize themselves and others to interact in ways that experiment with new forms of intellectual and emotional meaning' (p. 124). This definition was offered as a remedy to the view of leadership based in the traits of the leader, which functions as a means for followers to avoid responsibility and initiative. Gemmill and Oakley used a framework of alienation and learned helplessness as a context for their discussion of leadership. While this approach has considerable merit, it can be further clarified by incorporating an understanding of context through multiple levels of inquiry.

Without belaboring points made above, there are a few key ideas that may help to establish a broad definition of leadership as a process. First, leadership is a process that is not specifically a function of the person in charge. Leadership is a function of individual wills and of individual needs, and the result of the dynamics of collective will organized to meet those various needs. Second, leadership is a process of adaptation and of evolution; it is a process of dynamic exchange and the interchanges of value. Leadership is deviation from convention. Third, leadership is a process of energy, not structure. In this way, leadership is different from management – managers pursue stability, while leadership is all about change (Barker, 1997). Leadership, then, can be defined as *a process of transformative change where the ethics of individuals are integrated into the mores of a community as a means of evolutionary social development.*

Transformative change is structural change. While this form of change is possible and desirable in organizations, there are times and situations when it is disruptive and undesirable. If there is no need for change, there is no need for leadership. Management is used to maintain stability. When individuals understand that they can pursue their own needs by joining the collective movement, this motivates them to adapt their self-interest to shared goals. The 'leader' may only symbolize that adaptation, and not necessarily become the source of it. An individual's commitment to community goals and to structure can only emanate from the individual, not from the individual's boss. The individual may be inspired by the boss, but no one works hard to make someone else rich.

It should be clear that empirical verification of the proposed definition will not be easy, if it is in fact possible. Parry (1998) made a good case for using grounded theory as a method of researching the process of leadership. Does leadership evolve as a consequence of the environment responding to its demands, or as a creator of the environment, or both? What is the purpose of leadership, and how is it entwined with the purpose of life and the adult search for meaning? Social science research often assumes purpose or goals without actually attempting to define them

because they are not observable. The assessment of progress is necessarily a matter of value.

A new view of science and of empirical study must be incorporated in conjunction with the new definition. Instead of cause–effect relationships, we must look for challenge–response relationships. A great deal more thought must be devoted to the metaphysical issues of measurement: ‘I’m whatever your questions turn me into. Don’t you see that? It’s your questions that make me who I am’ (Pirsig, 1991: 220).

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