



The necessity of leadership

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Abstract: Over the years, leadership research has received increasing attention, yet defining leadership remains challenging. Contemporary studies in this field incorporate contextual and situational factors and considerations of what constitutes good leadership from a normative perspective. This semi-structured literature review aims to clarify our future leadership needs by examining 21st-century articles and key concepts. The findings indicate that leadership will continue to be relevant and that new skills will be necessary to address both current and future challenges. Formal vertical leadership will coexist with informal individual and self-leadership, as knowledge workers are expected to assume and share leadership responsibilities. This raises a critical question: 'What leadership skills will be required in the near future, and how can we develop these skills to ensure effective leadership?'

Keywords: Leadership, leadership development, self-leadership, contemporary times, necessity.

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Introduction

This semi-systematic literature review examines the content and necessity of leadership in both current and future contexts. The study is based on the observation that investment in leadership within managerial and business studies has increased (Bolden, 2004), underscoring its significance. Despite this, there remains uncertainty about the true nature of leadership and the requirements for its effective development to ensure 'good' leadership.

Literature review on key concepts

To understand the need for leadership in both current and future contexts, it is essential to first comprehend what leadership entails.

Defining leadership

Despite its ancient origins and extensive research, scholars still struggle to define leadership precisely and conclusively. It is one of the world's oldest preoccupations (Kotterman, 2006), with literature on leadership dating back several centuries, from early Greek philosophers like Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics and Politics) to contemporary research and writings (Bolden, 2004; Toor et al., 2008). In the early 16th century, Machiavelli (1514/1981) removed leadership from the realm of God and placed it within the sphere of human activities (Barker, 2001). Since then, leadership has remained a prominent topic among scholars. Despite the increased attention leadership has received since the beginning of the 20th century (Avolio et al., 2009; Bolden, 2004; Crevani et al., 2010; Higgs, 2003), it remains poorly understood (Fairhurst, 2008; Hogan et al., 2005; Vroom et al., 2007).

What makes leadership so hard to define? Grint (2004) identifies four key problems. Firstly, there is a lack of agreement on whether leadership derives from personal qualities or traits, or if it is a social construct. Secondly, there is a debate regarding formal

leadership (with formally allocated authority) versus informal leadership (without formally allocated authority). Thirdly, there is the question of whether leadership is intentional and exerts a causal influence on the behaviour of followers, or if it is determined by the context and situations in which it takes place. Lastly, there is the issue of whether leadership is embodied in individuals or groups, and whether it is a purely human phenomenon.

The trait approach, originating in the first half of the twentieth century, assumes that leadership is determined by the traits that an individual possesses (Bolden, 2004; Winston et al., 2006). Rather than focusing on traits, an alternative viewpoint is to concentrate on what leaders do. The behavioural approach towards leadership emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (Vroom et al., 2007) and focuses on the actions of leaders—what they do—and includes the context in which leadership occurs. A central idea of the behavioural approach is that one cannot separate the leader(s) from the context (Osborn et al., 2002). However, according to Vroom et al. (2007), neither the trait nor the behavioural approach has produced a solid body of scientific evidence sufficient to guide practice.

The distinction between formal and informal leadership lies in who authorises the power or authority of the leader. In formal leadership, it is the organisation that authorises the power of the leader. In informal leadership, group members or employees recognise someone as a leader. In this notion, leadership has nothing to do with having a title, as someone can also be a leader without a title, such as in a place of worship, a neighbourhood, or a family (Kruse, 2013). One can distinguish between formal and informal (or emergent) leadership. However, in recent years, the leadership debate has shifted towards emphasising leadership as a collective activity rather than the actions of exclusively formal leaders (Crevani et al., 2010).

There is a broad consensus among scholars (e.g., Abernethy et al., 2010; Aubrey et al., 2013; Ahlquist et al., 2011; Hogg, 2010; Kaiser et al., 2012; Winston et al., 2006; Toor et al., 2008) that leadership is focused on followers. Leaders motivate or empower followers to achieve a certain goal by producing desired outcomes. However, there is still some debate in the scientific field about whether the effect of leaders on followers is intentional or determined by context and situations. Some scholars argue that the context or situation is a determining factor in the outcome of leadership. According to scholars such as Ahlquist et al. (2011), French et al. (1959), Lunenburg (2012), and Osborn et al. (2002), leaders use their power to influence followers depending on the situation. French et al. (1959) distinguish five types of power: legitimate power—based on the position that the leader holds in the organisation—reward power—rewarding followers after obtaining goals—coercive power—using punishment to influence followers—expert power—based on the extent to which the follower attributes knowledge and expertise to the leader—and referent power—influencing followers because they like, admire, or respect the leader. One can argue whether the power of leaders influences the behaviour of followers, or whether contextual and situational factors determine how leaders use their powers to influence followers.

A contrasting notion of leadership is the concept of self-leadership, where the leader is both the leader and the follower, influencing and improving their own behaviour and actions (Yammarino et al., 2005). Most present-day researchers include situational variables in their investigations, according to Vroom et al. (2007), as determinants of leader behaviour or as moderating variables interacting with traits or behaviour.

Some scholars view leadership as a social construct, suggesting that leadership is a human phenomenon. Osborn et al. (2002) explain leadership as a social construction, where its exact definition is embedded in time, place, and the collective minds of the observers. In this sense, leadership is contextual and can change over time depending on what the situation and context require. From a human evolutionary viewpoint, leadership evolved as a mechanism that allowed individuals to pull together for a common purpose—to compete with neighbouring groups and defend territory and resources. Hogan et al. (2005) explain that in times when humans lived as hunter-gatherers, leadership evolved as a mechanism that allowed individuals to work together for a common purpose, instead of working alone to take care of themselves. Despite the many arguments for leadership as a purely constructed human phenomenon, it is hard to ignore the fact that leadership is not strictly a human matter. Leadership exists among animals as well, from alpha wolves to female-led societies among lions and elephants.

Research on female leadership is relatively scarce, with a disappointing amount of attention paid to women as leaders (Gardner et al., 2010). Female leaders are often subjected to masculinised expectations. One explanation might be that female leadership has mostly been researched from a male leadership perspective (Eagly et al., 2010). The few studies conducted regarding female leadership indicate that female leadership could differ from male leadership. Hewlett et al. (2005) found that professional women of colour develop leadership and other transferable skills in their neighbourhoods and communities more so than their white male or female counterparts. These findings

may suggest that females of colour more often display informal leadership. To understand what leadership entails, it would only seem logical to include aspects of gender and ethnicity in its scope.

While leadership research is extensive, it remains difficult to precisely define what leadership entails. The definition of leadership is partly dependent on viewpoints and differing stances, focusing on distinguishing between various approaches and styles. Besides the trait, behavioural, contingency, or situational leadership theories, scholars have defined other leadership theories such as transactional, transformational, or authentic leadership. All these theories highlight certain aspects of leadership while neglecting others that different scholars find relevant. An overall definition of leadership is lacking, although some scholars provide general descriptions. Kruse (2013) defines leadership as a social process that influences followers to maximise their efforts towards achieving a goal. This seems to be a good working definition of leadership, both formal and informal, except for self-leadership, where the leader is both the leader and the follower.

The need for leadership – present and future

Leadership exists largely because there has always been a historical need for it. Leaders motivate followers by providing purpose and meaning (Kempster et al., 2011). According to Caulfield (2013), leadership can be a powerful narrative that helps create a heightened sense of identity, community, and moral conduct among followers. In this sense, leadership enables followers to connect and form a community, helping them work together to achieve a common goal. Leadership provides a sense of direction, particularly necessary in times of crisis. Several studies suggest that an authoritative leadership style is typically preferred during a crisis (Gartzia et al., 2011), as opposed to, for example, shared leadership. Mulder et al. (1971, 1986) suggest that in times of crisis, leadership should not be shared, as efforts should be coordinated in one direction. Shared leadership can complicate the process of coordinating efforts.

Given the perpetual need for leadership, the question arises: what kind of leadership do we need in current times? According to Pearce (2004), the emergence of knowledge work caused a shift in leadership from vertical leadership to rotating leadership, involving the team member who holds the required specific knowledge or skills at that moment. This requires leadership skills from multiple team members, as they work together and rotate leadership duties. This also necessitates a situational or contextual approach to leadership, recognising the different leadership needs depending on the situation.

The need for shared leadership connects with the need for individual leadership, or in other words, self-leadership. As employees become more integral to the overall process, the term self-leadership becomes associated with the self-control behaviours required in the modern workplace (Yun et al., 2016). Moldoveanu et al. (2019) explain that individual leadership becomes more urgent as employees often work in teams using collaborative problem-solving platforms, which require individual initiative and consequential decision-making.

Even though our modern world features extremely effective leadership (Newstead et al., 2019), there is still a need for new leadership skills. According to Collinge et al. (2010) and Dess et al. (2000), environmental challenges combined with the radical transformation of society due to globalisation, shifting

demographic patterns, and the ongoing revolution in information and communication technologies demand new leadership skills. Future leaders will need new skill sets, including greater collaboration skills, organisational architect abilities, a more flexible style, and the capacity to be open and adaptable to new ideas (Martin, 2007). While the need for leadership will remain in future times, the nature of leadership itself will continue to evolve.

Leadership further explored

When delving into what leadership is and why we need it, another theme emerges: understanding what 'good' leadership entails. In leadership research, much emphasis is placed on the outcomes or results to determine if leadership is 'effective' or 'good'. In recent years, there has been increased attention on ethical leadership to determine if leadership is indeed 'good'. Newstead et al. (2019) state that good leadership implies that people are motivated by the right reasons, moving towards ethical and effective ends. While what is ethical or 'good' is subjective, ethical leadership has a normative component, indicating that the quality of leadership is not only determined by the outcomes or results but also by how these outcomes or results affect others.

Methodology

Leadership is a broad topic that is conceptualised differently in various contexts; therefore, we chose the method of a semi-systematic review focusing on the exploration of key concepts (Snyder, 2019). A semi-systematic review makes it possible to detect new themes. We started with a structured thematic analysis, conducting searches in Google Scholar and WorldCat using the keywords: leadership, development, need, and relevance. A selection was made based on the following criteria:

1. The most cited articles since the year 2000
2. The most influential sources
3. Empirical studies.

Discussion

While a precise definition of leadership is lacking, its relevance and development persist. Increasingly, researchers are incorporating context and situational factors into their understanding of leadership. The information era and the rise of knowledge work have underscored the need for individual and self-leadership. The necessity for leadership shifts from vertical to a blend of vertical and individual leadership, contingent on the situation and the person possessing the required knowledge or skills at a given time. Employees are becoming more involved in the overall processes of organisations and are expected to manage leadership tasks within teams. This indicates a pressing need for individual leadership skills and self-leadership, as well as a deeper understanding of these concepts. Individual initiative and decisive decision-making are essential aspects of contemporary knowledge work. Furthermore, environmental challenges and societal transformations amplify the need to develop new leadership skills.

There is no consensus among scholars on whether leadership is dependent on situational or contextual factors, although these factors are increasingly being included in research. The concept of what constitutes good leadership has also evolved over time. Initially, the focus was predominantly on the outcomes of leadership—the results. Over time, the focus has shifted to include moral and ethical aspects. Good leadership now

encompasses not only achieving positive results but also ensuring that the leader's moral conduct does not harm those affected by the actions taken to achieve these results. To fully understand the influence of situational or contextual factors on leadership, ethical aspects as well as the influence of gender and ethnicity on leadership need to be better understood.

This research primarily focuses on the contemporary need for leadership; therefore, we included articles from the 21st century in this review. Including older articles might have provided a broader picture of what leadership entails; however, we assume that focusing on more recent articles leads to a better understanding of our current and future needs regarding leadership. This review shows that leadership continues to evolve and that our current demands require us to understand what leadership skills are necessary for present and future challenges.

The purpose of this literature review is to understand what leadership entails and to illuminate our current and future needs regarding leadership and leadership development. It is significant to comprehend how we can further enhance our leadership skills to navigate modern challenges. Future research should delve deeper into situational and contextual factors, particularly concerning individual and self-leadership.

Conclusion

There is a consensus among researchers that leadership involves motivating or influencing followers to achieve a common goal. From the perspective of individual or self-leadership, the individual is both the leader and the follower. Various approaches aim to offer insight into what leadership entails, ranging from trait or behavioural theories to situational or contextual factors that influence leadership.

New leadership skills are necessary in the information era, as knowledge workers need to focus on self-control behaviours. Additionally, new leadership skills are needed to address environmental challenges and social transformations. In current times, informal leadership is becoming increasingly relevant, complementing formal vertical leadership, which will remain important in the near future.

To understand leadership, one must comprehend what good leadership entails and how leadership develops. Some scholars attempt to answer this question from a virtuous, moral, or ethical perspective, suggesting that good leadership goes beyond achieving good results to include the moral intent of the leader as well. To understand leadership in its entirety, it seems logical to further conduct research regarding situational and contextual aspects that influence the development of leadership, such as gender and ethnicity, as well as ethical aspects.

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