Leadership and Followership

- - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Catherine T. Kwantes

UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP

While the focus of understanding leadership has typically been understanding who a leader is, what characteristics are possessed by the leader, what a leader does, and the match between leadership behaviour and the situation, a more recent trend in the leadership literature is to understand that leadership does not function in isolation — rather, it is part of a dyadic relationship with followership. This understanding highlights the fact that there is no leadership without followership — if nobody is following, nobody is leading.

FOLLOWERSHIP

So what constitutes followership? What sets the stage for individuals in organizations and in communities to be willing to ascribe leadership to a person, and to be willing to be a follower of that leader? To understand this, it is important to place the focus on the follower side of the dyad — to understand follower expectations of leaders, and to learn how leaders should be and what they should do to earn the trust of others and the willingness of others to follow where the leader may lead.

These expectations of leaders have roots in many places — an individual's personality, the values a person holds, and exemplars of both good and bad leadership a person may have been exposed to in the past. Personality affects leadership preferences to the extent that individuals may prefer to leave decision making to others (directive leadership) or may prefer to be consulted (participative leadership). Beyond personality, the social environment of a person has a two-fold effect on leadership expectations — through explicit teaching and learning, and also through implicit learning from experiences. Societal culture molds a social environment by transmitting values from one generation to another. Within a societal culture, people are exposed to examples of what leadership attributes are accepted and work and what attributes have unsatisfactory outcomes. Children are taught what is important, what is honourable, what is valuable by their parents, grandparents, and others in the community. These values in turn are brought to bear in expectations of leaders. When extensive consultation and community discussion before decisions are made are valued in a culture,

participative leadership becomes valued and directive leadership devalued. When societal culture highlights the use of power as desirable and appropriate, more directive leadership is seen as more valuable, and participative leadership may be viewed as weak leadership. Similarly, social environments provide exemplars that teach what effective leadership does and does not look like. When directive leaders do not earn followership, members of the social environment are provided with a clear example that directive leadership is not effective and, as a result, a clear expectation that participative leadership is most effective can, in turn, follow.

Within a social environment, leadership expectations are perpetuated through the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon. When a leader behaves in a way that is expected, followers in turn support the leader, creating successful leadership. This cycle is reinforced by the social exchange that is put into place between leaders and followers — those who support the leader are often given extra attention, and maybe even extra resources. The leader comes to rely on those who provide this support, which in turn can provide a positive exchange for both leader and follower. Thus, followership can actually direct leadership through its expectations and can also, in part, explain leadership behaviours and effectiveness (Wang, Van Iddekinge, Zhang, & Bishoff, 2018).

Leadership is relational (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and the type of interactions a leader and follower have is important for understanding leadership effectiveness. Leaders have a variety of bases of power available to them. Although it is a theory of leadership and power rather than of followership, French and Raven (1959) suggest that leaders can influence others through several methods. The first is simply by holding a leadership position in an organization or community. When someone in an organization holds a position of authority due to her or his place on the organizational chart, that person has a degree of influence, or leadership, in directing activities related to organizational activities — in other words, legitimate leadership. Leaders may also exert influence due to followers' perceptions that they hold a certain amount of knowledge; and in turn, that perceived expertise may influence others to follow their lead. Similarly, followers may bestow leadership on someone they like — they follow because they have an affinity with the leader, and in turn give power to that person to lead. Sometimes leadership is given based on an expectation that there will be a reward provided for following a particular individual; or alternatively, in some cases, leadership is given through fear that there will be punishment or retribution if followership is not provided. Thus, expectations inherent in particular situations can impact who is chosen to be a leader and the extent to which others are willing to follow that individual.

Through these mechanisms, individuals develop implicit leadership prototypes (Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984). These prototypes are implicit, meaning that they are often not stated or described or examined, but nevertheless impact perceptions of leaders. Implicit leadership prototypes are ideas regarding what a "real" leader is, or what a "real" leader does. They incorporate ideas of how successful and effective leaders behave and how they relate to those who would follow them. Implicit leadership theory also suggests that individuals hold real leaders up for comparison to these implicit leadership prototypes, and are, in turn, judged by the extent to which they match the prototype. When a person who aspires to be a leader matches the prototype, he or she is more likely to be followed than if there is little match to the prototype. An understanding of implicit prototypes, and of how social environments shape those prototypes, are therefore important to understanding leadership.

LEARNING ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP

While every individual holds implicit ideas of what leadership is and is not, and what makes leadership a success or a failure, examining leadership through the lens of research helps to establish more generalized views of leadership, and can also aid in understanding how followership develops, and the role of followership in developing leadership. The topic of leadership has a very long history of research, from early explorations into what traits make a leader to understanding how leaders behave, to looking for matches between what situations call for and what traits leaders should exhibit to be successful, to looking at followership as determining leadership.

Research can be either qualitative or quantitative — that is, asking people to respond in their own words, or asking people to indicate on a sliding scale (for example, from 1 to 7) the extent to which they agree with statements. Each has its own place in furthering an understanding of a topic. Qualitative research, when individuals respond using their own words, gives rich insight into how respondents think about a topic, and allows for unique perspectives to emerge. Researchers do not put boundaries on responses; often, researchers are looking to understand a topic from the point of view of the respondents, rather than starting the research with a preconceived idea of how a topic may be framed or defined. Quantitative research, on the other hand, asks participants to respond to specific statements that researchers believe represent — or even define — a particular issue or topic. This approach allows for comparisons. For example, researchers may find that men generally respond differently than women to a set of questions, or that members of a particular ethnic group differ from members of another in the way they respond to the items.

While each approach has its benefits and its limitations, using both approaches together can move a field ahead in attempts to understand leadership. Qualitative approaches, asking people to describe leadership in their own terms, allows for new understandings to emerge about leadership in general, and also provides a way to understand how a specific group of individuals describes leadership. Indigenous people may or may not describe leadership similarly to members of other ethnic groups. Each group of people is likely to describe some commonalities, but also to describe aspects of leadership that are unique to a specific people, place, or time. On the other hand, a survey approach where everyone responds to the same questions allows for the development of theories regarding what is the same, what differs, and why. The key understanding about research is that no one research project ever provides definitive answers that can be assumed to represent universal truth. Rather, each research project contributes to a growing body of knowledge that can guide understanding and can provide suggestions for when and how the findings may apply, as well as when the findings may not apply.

FOLLOWERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP IN THE INDIGENOUS CONTEXT

Indigenous peoples in Canada have a long history of strong leadership traditions. As peoples who have been colonized, however, current ideas about leadership may be mixed, as ideas come from that heritage but are also often informed by leadership norms and examples in the colonizing, or dominant, cultures. As such, the type of leadership prototype that any sin-

gle indigenous person holds is likely to be affected by the extent to which that individual feels connected to her/his heritage culture and the dominant culture. Recently published work (Stonefish & Kwantes, 2017) suggests that Indigenous peoples in Canada generally subscribe to four different strategies of navigating and combining heritage and dominant cultures. Some Indigenous individuals forge strong ties with both cultures, effectively becoming members of a group that Stonefish and Kwantes called "Attached" individuals. Some have ties with both cultures but stronger ties with the heritage culture than the dominant culture ("Heritage Positive"), and some with ties to both but stronger ties with the dominant culture ("Mainstream Positive"). Some individuals may rely less on attachments to a cultural group and focus on individual uniqueness, representing members of a "Detached" group. Understanding what implicit leadership prototypes are for members of each of these groups is important for understanding how members of each group expect a leader to behave — which, in turn, affects the extent to which these individuals are willing to grant someone a leadership role and to follow.

Elsewhere in this volume, Kwantes and Stonefish report on a research project undertaken to learn more about what implicit leadership prototypes may exist for Indigenous people, depending on their orientation towards their heritage culture rather than a dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. This represents a more nuanced approach than has previously been undertaken to understand leadership within a colonized context. Participants were asked to rate leadership characteristics according to the extent to which each characteristic strongly supported or strongly inhibited outstanding leadership. While this quantitative approach allows for a direct comparison of the four different groups, it has the limitation of asking for assessments of characteristics without allowing participants to provide characteristics in their own voice. Nevertheless, the findings that members of the Detached group view effective leadership behaviours very differently than members who have stronger cultural attachments to one or both cultures provides a platform for asking new questions and to develop another building block in the search to understand leadership from a multifaceted Indigenous perspective.

LESSONS FOR LEADERSHIP FROM A FOLLOWERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

If leadership is viewed as the result of followership, rather than as the result of something a leader is or does, then the expectations of followers become important to understand. Culture impacts these expectations, and effective leadership is dependent to a large extent on a match between what is expected and valued within a culture (implicit leadership theories) and what a leader exhibits (House et al, 2002). While this is true in all arenas, and while leadership is always critical for organizations, the link between leaders and followers is closer in some circumstances than in others. For example, it may be even more pertinent in efforts where leadership is more direct and hands-on, such as in entrepreneurial organizations (Cogliser & Brigham, 2004) and organizations that emphasize corporate entrepreneurship (*cf* Chang, Chang, & Chen, 2017).

A recent review of leadership and entrepreneurship, in fact, highlighted the importance of a follower-centric view of leaders in entrepreneurial organizations, inasmuch as these leaders "are characterized by an attentiveness to their followers, the empathy shown to followers, and the nurturing of followers towards their full potential" (Reid et al, 2018, p. 159).

Leadership development, then, especially in entrepreneurial contexts, should explicitly incorporate an understanding of followership. Relationship building is a key component of leadership development (Kwok et al, 2018). Leaders cannot lead if they are not in touch with follower expectations, as the true power of leadership rests in the willingness of followers to grant it.

REFERENCES

Chang, Y., Chang, C., & Chen, C. (2017). Transformational leadership and corporate entrepreneurship. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 38*(6), 812–833.

Cogliser, C.C., & Brigham, K.H. (2004). The intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship: Mutual lessons to be learned. *Leadership Quarterly, 15*(6), 771–799.

French, J.R.P., Jr., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150–167). Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

Graen, G.B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader–member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly, 6*(2), 219–247.

House, R., Javidan, M., Hanges, P., & Dorfman, P. (2002). Understanding cultures and implicit leadership theories across the globe: An introduction to project GLOBE. *Journal of World Business, 37*(1), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9516(01)00069-4

Kwok, N., Hanig, S., Brown, D.J., & Shen, W. (2018). How leader role identity influences the process of leader emergence: A social network analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.04.003

Lord, R.G., Foti, R.J., & de Vader, C.L. (1984). A test of leadership categorization theory: Internal structure, information processing, and leadership perceptions. *Organizational Behavior & Human Performance, 34*(3), 343–378. https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(84)90043-6

Reid, S.W., Anglin, A.H., Baur, J.E., Short, J.C., & Buckley, M.R. (2018). Blazing new trails or opportunity lost? Evaluating research at the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship. *The Leadership Quarterly, 29*(1), 150–164.

Stonefish, T., & Kwantes, C.T. (2017). Values and acculturation: A First Nations exploration. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 61*, 63–76. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.09.005

Wang, G., Van Iddekinge, C.H., Zhang, L., & Bishoff, J. (2018). Meta-analytic and primary investigations of the role of followers in ratings of leadership behavior in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/apI10000345