What Is This Thing Called Leadership?¹

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After participating in two days of discussions about leadership, I am tempted to suggest in these closing comments that our focal concept is little more than a semantic inkblot, an ambiguous word onto which people project their personal fantasies, hopes, and anxieties about what it takes to make a difference. That would be more provocative than constructive, however, because there really is something there. The challenge is to find it, tame it, and set it off on a course that generates knowledge about leadership that is more robust, cumulative, and useful than what we collectively have produced so far. The papers and discussions at this conference offer a number of leads for doing just that. In these remarks, I raise up six themes that emerged from our conference sessions, themes that strike me as having special promise for advancing our collective understanding of organizational leadership.

Domain

We have been mainly concerned at this conference with the leadership of purposive social systems, by which I mean sets of people who are identifiable as system members and who work interdependently to accomplish one or more collective objectives. Dyads, groups, and whole organizations all can fall within our domain if it is possible to distinguish members from nonmembers and if members coordinate their activities in pursuing some shared purpose. An evangelist without a flock or the writer of a political tract would fall outside our domain (no social system) until such time as the evangelist formed a congregation or the writer joined a political cell. Travelers waiting to board a plane also would be outside our domain (no shared purpose) until such time as, say, the flight is cancelled and the travelers begin to discuss hiring a bus to get them to their destination.

The domain of purposive social systems may seem too restrictive for a robust analysis of leadership phenomena. The popular press, after all, frequently refers to the “leadership” that is provided by a charismatic orator, a clever financier, or even a brilliant scientist. That much inclusiveness would hobble scholarly work on the topic. Productive research and theory on any phenomenon, leadership included, requires finding the sweet spot on a continuum that ranges from narrow specificity (e.g., analysis of a particular kind of leader in particular circumstances at a particular historical time) to unbounded inclusiveness (e.g., anyone who makes any kind of a difference in any domain). Restricting our attention to the leadership of purposive social systems gives us a domain that is wide enough to be interesting, while protecting us from the impossibility of trying to herd a diverse set of incomparable phenomena into the same conceptual pen.

Criteria

Even if you accept the domain just described (and thereby implicitly agree to the restrictions on generalizability that come with any reduction in domain scope), there remains the question of what we actually mean when we talk about “good” or “effective” or “successful” leadership. In his remarks at this conference, Joel Podolny noted that we tend to focus on those leader behaviors that can be shown to foster successful organizational outcomes. We might learn more about leadership, he suggested, if we studied leadership qua leadership, de-coupled from outcome indicators.

There is merit in what Joel suggested. Too often we thoughtlessly accept conventional system outcomes, such as productivity or profitability, as the ultimate criteria of leadership success and label leaders who were in place when the favorable outcomes appeared as “effective.” But I do not want to give up so easily on leader-outcome links. Indeed, if we accept the view that leaders are those who make a difference, then it is incumbent upon us to answer the question, “a difference in what?” The answer to that question is important, because it requires us to be explicit about the values that underlie our leadership research.

So perhaps what we need is not a de-coupling of leadership from success, but instead an expansion of what we mean by success. Specifically, what if we viewed great leadership as that which enhances what I will call “system viability”? A viable social system, as I have argued elsewhere, has three attributes. First, those who are affected by the work of the system (for example, clients, collaborators, or other stakeholders) are reasonably satisfied, and perhaps even pleased by, what the system produces. Second, the system itself becomes more capable as a performing unit over time. And third, individual members derive at least as much personal learning and fulfillment as frustration and alienation from their work within the system.

System viability can be readily conceptualized, and can be measured (although sometimes with difficulty) at any level of analysis: a dyad, a group, an organization, or even a nation state can be assessed on these three dimensions. And, in this view, anything that fosters system viability is an act of leadership.

Functions

If we code leadership as any action that fosters system viability, then we are taking what is generally known as the functional approach to leadership. In this approach, anyone who helps get critical system functions accomplished, including members who hold no formal leadership role, is exercising leadership. No one person is solely responsible for accomplishing leadership work, nor is there any one best strategy or style for carrying it out.

A key feature of the functional approach is that one needs to know as much, or more, about the system being led as about the personal qualities of those who would lead it. There can be no useful theory of leadership, therefore, without an accompanying theory that specifies what is required for systems to achieve their main purposes. Ever since 1938, when Chester Barnard published his classic book The functions of the executive, scholars have sought to identify the
functions that, when accomplished, contribute to the viability of organizational systems. My own work, which is mainly at the team level, has identified both some generic functions (for example, diagnosing team strengths and vulnerabilities, creating performance-enabling structures and systems, and helping team members find ways to exploit the positive features of their performance situation), as well as a number of more specific functions that have specifically to do with fostering and sustaining teamwork.

The functional approach nudges us away from the most extreme versions of both psychological and sociological thinking about leadership. Because members can use their own special skills and preferred styles to fulfill system functions, we are released from the psychologists’ unending search for the traits of effective leaders. And because actions that fulfill critical system functions actually do affect system viability, we need not be too bothered by the claim of some sociologists that leaders are but pawns in a larger drama that is driven almost entirely by external forces.

In addition to his concern about the outcome-focus of leadership research, Joel also was worried about the degree to which our concepts and theories resonate with the managers who we hope would be helped by our scholarly contributions. There are two contrasting ways to go wrong in bringing the fruits of our research to working leaders. The first—and I think this is the one that Joel was worried about—is to expect leaders to learn, and then to use, concepts and models that are abstract and far removed from their daily experiences. We would be asking them to think like a scholar rather than a manager, and then to do the translation from theory to practice on their own. We should not require leaders to do that, nor should we expect that they will be disposed to do so.

A second way to go wrong is to tell leaders exactly what they are most ready to hear. To illustrate, lay observers, including many working managers, tend to attribute to leaders causal responsibility for system outcomes that actually may be shaped by more powerful but less salient influences. This tendency is so strong that Ruth Wageman and I have given it a name: the Leader Attribution Error. To the extent that we focus our research and teaching on the personal attributes and behavioral styles of individuals who are widely viewed as great leaders (e.g., “here is how Jack Welch did it, and if you use him as a model you can do it too”) we perpetuate that attributional error. Leaders are likely to accept and affirm what we say, but they will not be challenged to consider alternative ways of thinking about leadership or to come up with alternative strategies for enacting their leadership roles.

The functional approach offers a third way, one that is neither so familiar and acceptable that it can be assimilated intact into leaders’ existing cognitive structures, nor so discrepant from those structures that it will be ignored or dismissed out of hand. In the language of psychology, the functional approach prompts accommodation, a change in cognitive structure, rather than either assimilation or rejection. And, in my experience, leaders do resonate with research findings that identify those leadership functions that are most critical to system viability—and that prompt them to consider fresh strategies for getting those functions fulfilled.
The context of leadership was the most frequently mentioned construct in the opening session of this conference—all speakers but one addressed it explicitly. Context is indeed a challenge: What are we to do about the radical differences in the context of leadership for, say, a Boy Scout troop, a senior leadership team, a professional string quartet, and a product development team in an industrial firm? Could it really be true that leadership operates the same way in these radically different contexts? Indeed, does leadership even mean the same thing across these contexts?

The two most common suggestions for dealing with contextual differences are to develop contingency theories that take account of context, and to develop mid-range theories that are tailored for certain contexts but that are not presumed or expected to apply to others. There are non-trivial difficulties with both of these approaches.

Contingency models identify those attributes of situations that moderate the impact of leader behaviors or styles on collective outcomes, thereby providing research-based guidance about how leaders ought to behave in various contexts. In some contexts, for example, a participative style may be called for, whereas in others a more directive style may work best. Contingency models necessarily become complex as research identifies more and more situational attributes that moderate the leader behavior-collective outcome relationship. And in that inevitability lies the rub: The more complete and complex a contingency model, the more it requires of leaders a level of on-line cognitive processing that can exceed human capabilities—especially when the stakes are high and the leader is under high cognitive load.

An alternative strategy for dealing with contextual differences would be to develop what Joe Nye described as “mid-range” leadership theories. That is, rather than have one general model of leadership that is riddled with contingent propositions, we could develop separate models for each type of context in which we have special interest. Each of those mid-range theories would be specifically tuned to the features of the context addressed. So we might have, for example, a separate leadership model for, say, volunteer organizations, another for small entrepreneurial businesses, and yet another for multi-national conglomerates. Such models could indeed be more helpful to leaders in each of those contexts than any general model could ever be. But this approach strikes me as a bit inelegant from a scholarly perspective. Do we really want to have different theories of leadership even for contexts as different as public sector organizations vs. businesses vs. non-profit organizations? Or for European vs. Asian enterprises? Or for manufacturing vs. service-providing firms? The list could get long and cumbersome.

Is there an alternative to contingency models and mid-range theories for dealing with the very real differences in leadership contexts? Might it be possible to develop models of system leadership in which leaders find themselves quite naturally and automatically taking appropriate account of the special opportunities and constraints of their contexts? I realize that this may sound like magic, so I hasten to say that I do not have such a model in mind. But behavioral models do exist in some domains that have exactly this property.
Consider, for example, transactions that take place within an economic system. It does not make much of a difference whether we are trading products, services, futures, or favors. Nor is it consequential where the exchanges happen—the basic laws of transaction economics apply in all cases so long as the overall economic system is appropriately structured. Or consider mechanism design theory, again from economics. This approach, as set forth by Eric Maskin and his colleagues, involves the design of rules that generate a desired collective outcome even though individual participants act solely on the basis of their personal interests.

These examples from economics have little direct relevance to leadership theory, and I have provided them only to show that when the right conditions are in place appropriate behavior can occur automatically, without continuous or effortful on-line management. But note well that such models require that certain structural conditions be in place—a systemic infrastructure if you will—if they are to work properly. It could be interesting to speculate about the structural features of social systems that would help leaders naturally and appropriately take the special features of their contexts into account as they carry out their leadership work. This line of thinking, in all likelihood, will take us nowhere. I have sketched it here in hopes that we can continue to generate alternatives, even seemingly radical ones, that offer the possibility of finding ways of dealing with leadership contexts that are both conceptually satisfying and of practical value to those who work within them.

Conditions

Earlier in these remarks I suggested that if we are to develop robust leadership models we will need to move beyond our human tendency to attribute system outcomes to the actions of individual leaders. There is another natural human tendency that, I believe, also is impeding our progress—namely, the disposition to rely on cause-effect models in leadership research, theory and practice. We want to make the team perform superbly, the conference succeed, the organization achieve its purposes, the nation prosper. Let me suggest that traditional cause-effect thinking is not merely inappropriate for the analysis of social system leadership but that it actually impedes progress in our field. And let me also propose an alternative. Rather than try to identify the direct causes of what transpires in social systems, might we instead focus on identifying the structural conditions that, when in place, increase the likelihood (but do not guarantee) social system viability?

To think about the conditions within which systems chart their own courses is very different from conventional cause-effect models as well as from the action strategies that derive from those models. To illustrate, let me draw on an analogy I have used before—namely, the two different strategies that can be used by a pilot in landing an aircraft. One strategy is to manage the system continuously in real time. The pilot actively flies the airplane down, continuously adjusting heading, sink rate, and airspeed with the objective of arriving at the runway threshold just above stall speed, ready to flare the aircraft and touch down smoothly. The alternative strategy is to get the aircraft stabilized on approach while still far from the field, making small corrections as needed to heading, power, or aircraft configuration to keep the plane "in the groove." It is well known among pilots that the safer strategy is the second one; indeed,
when a pilot winds up in the first situation the prudent action is to go around and try the approach again.

To be stabilized on approach is to have the basic conditions established such that the natural course of events leads to the desired outcome—in this case, a good landing. The same way of thinking applies in many other domains of human endeavor. Consider, for example, constantly tinkering with a nation's interest rates, money supply, and tax policies, versus getting fundamentally sound economic conditions in place and letting the economy run itself. Or micro-managing the development of a child, versus creating a good family context that promotes healthy but mostly autonomous development. Or trying to foster creativity by telling someone to "be creative" and giving that person lots of creativity instruction and exercises, versus providing a relaxing and resource-rich setting and letting the creative response appear when it will.

In all of these instances the better strategy is to devote the first and greater portion of one's energies to establishing conditions that lead naturally to the desired outcomes and the lesser portion to on-line process management. The same considerations apply to the design and leadership of social systems. Having the right conditions in place opens possibilities, allowing leaders to do their work in their own way given their particular systemic contexts, using their own special strengths and styles, and drawing on the full array of other resources that are available to them.

To illustrate, let me describe an instance in which a leader took the condition-creating approach in a highly improbable setting—a symphony orchestra concert hall. I had the opportunity to observe Russian conductor Yuri Temirkanov lead a major U.S. orchestra in a performance of a Mahler symphony—the kind of piece that can invite the grandest arm-waving, body-swaying gyrations. But not from Temirkanov. He cued the musicians to begin and then his hands went to his sides. The orchestra played, and he listened. When some adjustment or assistance was needed, he provided it—signaling players with his eyes or body, or guiding a transition with his arms and hands. But that was about the extent of it. He had prepared the orchestra well during rehearsals and all the right conditions were in place. Now, at the performance, when it counted most, he was managing at the margin. As Temirkanov demonstrated, to focus on conditions rather than causes is to think differently about social systems, and to act differently when leading them.

It

Let me end my remarks with a mystery. We’ve all had the experience of seeing a master leader in action—someone who knows just what to do, how to do it, and precisely when to act to help a system achieve its purposes. We also have seen the opposite, individuals who have been carefully selected for leader roles, who have excelled in numerous leader development courses, and who have amassed considerable leadership experience—yet who somehow manage to do wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong way.

The same kind of thing is seen in the behavior of master teachers, psychotherapists, consultants, and others whose work requires them to intervene with people and systems.
somehow know just when to push and when to back off. When to focus on the individual and when to attend more to the social context. When to lighten up and when to tighten up. When to ask, when to suggest, and when to wait. These people operate at a level that extends far beyond whatever training they have had. Indeed, some masters seem able to do the right thing at the right time without having had any formal training at all.

Even more mysteriously, masters often are entirely at a loss when asked to explain why they did what they did at the time they did it. “I don’t really know,” they say. “I just felt that was the thing to do right then.” The contrast with novices and experts could not be more apparent. Novices do not yet know what they should do or how to do it, so they have to rely on instructions from someone else. Experts know what they should do, and they can tell you exactly why that is the proper action to take in their present circumstances. But masters transcend rules, guidelines, and principles—and wind up doing things that in many cases are as unexpected as they are effective.

So what is the “it” that master leaders have that the rest of us do not? How did they get it? And what might we do to help others develop it? We know a few things that may help us start to answer these questions. We know from decades of research that it is something quite different from what we have measured in our search for the traits of effective leaders. We know from doctoral student Colin Fisher’s research that it assuredly involve a finely honed sense of timing—knowing without deliberately thinking about it when to act and when to wait. I know from frustrating personal experience that we are unlikely to be able to train someone to become a master leader, not even when we use the best pedagogies currently available: Master-level leadership is something more than the sum of one’s accumulated knowledge and skill. And, finally, we know that merely putting a label on whatever it is that these leaders have (for example, calling it “social intelligence” or “charisma”) does not help much in understanding what it is that these people have or how they got it.

It is going to take some ingenuity to understand “it,” in part because people who have it are unable to explain what it is but also because they may be disinclined to tell us even if they could. I once asked someone who quite clearly had it if I could follow him around for a month or so over the summer to try to understand his superb capabilities. “No,” he said. “That wouldn’t be a good use of your time. And, besides, to do that would be wrong.” He meant it. He knew he had something special, but he seemed fearful that if someone were to closely inspect and analyze whatever it was, he just might lose it.

My exchange with that individual has stayed with me a long time (I propositioned him back when I was just starting out as a researcher). And now doctoral student Sujin Jang is going to take another run at it—this time not by following a master around but by using some recently developed methodologies to see if, at the very least, we can reliably assess individual differences in the degree to which people have whatever “it” is. I hope that she succeeds, and that in these brief remarks I may have tempted a couple of others to join the hunt. Because if we could solve this mystery we would be able, at our next conference, to explore some fascinating frontiers of leadership thought and practice that lay just beyond our collective reach at this one.