THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the problems confronting the discipline and outline possible directions for future leadership studies. The methodology is analytical and discursive. Two primary themes are addressed: (1) the problematics of leadership research and (2) the possibilities for future leadership study. The data base included an eclectic sample of the current leadership literature. Our specific conclusions are that: (1) we do not understand leadership fully (2) our current research methods are inadequate (3) our epistemology is outdated (4) opportunity for real progress is limitless (5) the discipline requires new topics, methods, epistemologies, paradigms, theories and research strategies. Overall, the paper concludes that significant progress in leadership research is contingent upon resolving existing problematics. The need for innovative developments is critical and the challenge to make headway is in the hands of research practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

If leadership research is to have a salutary future scholars must resolve a paradox confronting the discipline. This paper considers the future of leadership research. Our goals are to identify the key problems facing the discipline and enumerate some of the avenues open to future leadership research. We hope to discover where leadership research should be headed.

The paper addresses two themes that are prevalent in the literature. First, the problematics of leadership research are enumerated. Second, the possibilities for future leadership studies are outlined. Our thesis is that making significant headway in leadership research is contingent upon eliminating existing problematics.

The future is an extension of history and progress is always dependent upon resolution of outstanding problems. Leadership research is currently impeded by many problematics.

SOME PROBLEMATICS IN LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Three problematics have plagued leadership research. There are comprehension problems: we do not understand the subject very well. There are methodological problems: we seem to lack adequate tools for productive research. There are epistemological problems: we appear to be confused about what we wish to learn, and how we might approach finding out what we need to know about leadership.

Informed commentators suggest that research has failed to yield a good understanding of leadership. After some 5000 studies, leadership is still not clearly understood (Leavy, 1996: 440). Research volume does not correlate well with comprehension of the subject. "We know too little about what people in everyday leadership situations do..." (Bryman, 1998: 2). Leadership research has not informed us about what leaders actually do in their jobs.

The problem may be endemic with the academic study of leadership. Professor Richard Field lamented: "I question what we really understand about leadership at the highest levels, in that many of us haven't done those jobs...I don't think we have a deep understanding of doing the job of a leader and influencing others" (1998: 4). Our lack of understanding about leadership is reflected in the literature published on the subject: "The leadership literature has developed into quite a complicated way of thinking about leaders and what they do and how they act. But people generally see leaders as motivators and directors, fairly straightforward concepts" (Field, 1998: 4). Could it be that we lack the right tools for the job?

Methodological problems disorientate the ship of leadership research. Yukl (1989: 277-278) offered one of the early critiques of leadership research methodology when he charted the problems inherent in behavioural questionnaire research. While questionnaire instruments are employed widely in leadership research, their validity has been challenged. Yukl (1989) acknowledged the limitations of correlational type research. In addition, the reliability of this approach has been questioned. For Yukl, the solutions to these methodological problems could be found in the use of multiple research techniques. Leadership researchers are advised to employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to overcome problems associated with narrow focus.

Kuhnert (1993) contributed to this critique of leadership research methodology. He also acknowledged the over-reliance on self-reports and questionnaires. Kuhnert (1993: 198) noted that questionnaire based research tended to remove the investigator from direct contact with the phenomena being studied. It is difficult to understand clearly what you do not see directly for yourself. Van Fleet (1996: 429) echoed Kuhnert's observations: "Clearly measures of leaders derived from self-report, paper-and-pencil responses based on recollected events are subject to problems". The veracity of survey research has been called into question.

Collectively, these methodological problems suggest a more fundamental deficiency in our approach to leadership research. In fact, recent work has challenged the hegemony of the quantitative approach to

leadership research. There are fundamental problems in the way that leadership phenomena have been studied. Three examples of epistemological problems associated with the study of leadership should suffice.

Capozzoli (1995: 22) argued that leadership behaviour categories employed by researchers are not particularly relevant or meaningful. The challenge here is concerned with how one approaches the discovery of the unknown. Do you chart the unknown first and then go there or, in the alternate, do you go to the unknown first and then chart the passage? Both approaches to knowledge navigation are useful, but when and how should one employ each respective method?

Barker offered a major challenge to leadership research methodology when he enumerated obsolete assumptions inherent in quantitative research (1996: 41-43):

1. That human behaviour is exclusively explainable via science and the scientific method.

2. That the key unit of human behaviour is a single person and that this unit of analysis can be precisely measured.

3. That measures of individual behaviour can be generalized across populations and, indeed, entire societies.

4. That all effects have causes, which can be explained adequately by science.

In essence, Barker (1996) challenged the hegemony of the quantitative methodology employed in contemporary leadership research.

Similarly, Baruch (1998) exposed false claims made in various leadership research reports. After a comprehensive survey of the literature, Baruch (1998) concluded that many academic papers merely claim to study leadership. They were actually concerned with appointmentship (Baruch, 1998: 105). Could this confusion stem from the lack of a generally accepted definition of leadership? In any event, we must confront the problematics inherent in leadership research if progress is to be achieved in the future.

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Future leadership research holds the prospect of tangible advancement providing the discipline can develop a sense of direction and purpose. There appear to be no shortage of ideas for new approaches, topics and methods for leadership studies. What may be lacking is a consensus on the passage forward. Fortunately, there are some very specific suggestions in the literature concerning possibilities for leadership research.

Some Future Approaches

Leadership studies, as a discipline, needs to consider new approaches to the study of leadership phenomena. As far back as 1990, Van Seters & Field argued that "what is required is a conceptual integrating framework which ties the different approaches together, and makes possible the development of a comprehensive sustaining theory of leadership" (p. 40). This is an ambitious goal as it requires not only a macro paradigm for academic research but posits the development of a grand theory of leadership. However, Van Seters & Field (1990: 40) were adamant: "An integrative framework is a pre-requisite to a co-ordinated effort for scholars to advance leadership theory".

Chemers & Ayman (1993: 321) supported Van Seters & Field (1990) in the call for integration and unification of leadership research. Chemers & Ayman (1993: 328) argued that the discipline needs to attend to basic leadership processes. There are, therefore, considerable voices for integration, unification and sharper foci in leadership research.

Conger (1993: 48) advocated that new approaches be taken in leadership development. He recommended the application of leadership theory to produce higher quality executive training and development programmes. Similarly, Rost (1993: 183) generated a schedule of new approaches for leadership studies:

- ❖ Try new research designs and methods,
- ❖ Develop new research strategies,
- ❖ Launch a new school of leadership, and
- ❖ Conduct critical analyses of all leadership theory and models.

While many commentators call for more and different kinds of leadership research, Burns (1996: 156) implored researchers to quit their focus on leaders and what they do. This is one of the few proposals for less research into what leaders do.

There are also many demands for paradigm shifts within leadership research. Leavy (1996: 451) concluded that there is a "…need for frameworks which invite a more contextual, and indeed more sociological, treatment of leadership in the strategy field…". In similar fashion, Bresnen (1998) advised researchers to ground leadership study in its operational milieu. If Bresnen's call were heeded, researchers would need to consider leadership in the context of both management and organizational power structures. Van Fleet (1996: 428) endorsed the implications of these approaches when he recommended that leadership researchers enter organizations, conduct careful research and communicate the results widely.

Other commentators have also recommended fundamental realignments in our approach to leadership research. Bryman (1998) forecast a need for the integration of existing research. For example, he suggested that there was a requirement for a synopsis of all existing qualitative leadership research (Bryman, 1998: 8). Buchan (1998: 133) argued that it was equally important to know where leadership studies is going as to where it ought to be headed. Some form of planning and co-ordination is advised for the discipline of leadership studies.

Still other observers have suggested more focused approaches to leadership research. Field (1998: 12) thought that it was time to investigate leadership from the leader's perspective. His suggestion was endorsed by Parry (1998: 100) who argued that researchers target leadership directly. Parry's (1998) proposal contradicts the earlier recommendation of Burns (1996). It should come as no surprise that these commentators also fielded entirely new domains for leadership research.

Some Future Topics

It is a convention in academic research reports to conclude with recommendations for further or more specific research. The discipline of leadership studies adheres keenly to this convention. We have taken a look at some of these recommendations for a five year period, commencing in 1993 and running until 1998. A few commentators produced lengthy research agendas, some offered pairs of topics, while others generated a single subject for future investigation.

Three commentators proposed sizable research agendas. Chemers & Ayman (1993: 321-331) proposed six specific areas for future leadership research. Investigations should be initiated into leadership contingency, process, subjectivity, culture, ethics and leader emotions and non-conscious processes. By comparison, Bresnen (1998: 7-8) recommended four research foci: participation, measurement of the leadership constructs held by people, the relationship between leadership and social patterns, institutions and social dynamics and the context and activity patterns associated with leadership. Field (1998: 7) also proposed four topics for future study: the values of the organization, environmental awareness of leaders, leadership ethics, and the leadership of culture.

None of these research agendas is identical. However, Chemers & Ayman (1993) share interests in leadership ethics and culture with Field (1998). Bresnen's (1998) interest in leadership is political; he wants to know about people's thoughts of, participation in, relationships with, and contexts governing leadership. These issues concern both ideas and power. Chemers & Ayman (1993) have a more psychological interest in leadership. Field (1998) shares this last perspective but also exhibits a political interest in the leadership-community nexus.

Several researchers fielded pairs of research topics. Sarros et al (1995: 40) were interested in learning more about the interpersonal aspects of leadership roles and the impact of leadership on organizational

performance and culture. Leavy (1996: 448-449) recommended further research into how leaders influence organizational destinies and collective behaviour over the long run, as well as investigations of charisma and credibility. Both sets of recommendations anticipate studies of an applied sociological, or business studies, nature.

Another group of commentators each fielded a single topic for future leadership research. Organ & Fuller (1995: 3) were interested in the impact of leadership on economic performance and the shareholder value of firms. Terry (1995: 524) wanted to focus on the relationship with nature; specifically, how leaders relate to nature and environmental issues. Burns (1996: 156) wanted to learn more about the adaptive action process. Sloan (1996: 117) believed that new models of leadership were required by practitioners. Bryman (1998: 7) proposed future work on the processes by which leaders develop human values in organizations. Conger & Kanungo (1998: 250) planned to extend their previous research into charismatic and transformational leadership behaviour.

There is considerable diversity among these research proposals. The "single shot" commentators called for leadership research with economic, ecological, systems, practitioner-training, psychological and behavioural perspectives. Collectively, these proposals for future leadership research represent a rich diversity of projects. Perhaps a renewed methodological rigor could unify, or at least choreograph, these varied research interests.

Some Future Research Methods

Much of the existing leadership research employs either quantitative or discursive methodology. A number of commentators are now recommending different methods for leadership research. There is significant interest in employing more qualitative methodology.

Generally speaking scholars now accept the value, and potential, of qualitative research methodology. Many leadership researchers are now advocating greater use of qualitative methods (Leavy, 1996; Bresnen, 1998; Parry, 1998; Field, 1998). Bryman (1998: 8) argued that "...qualitative methods...[are] more likely to access leadership 'in situ' or at least detailed accounts of it...". Field (1998: 12) thought that grounded theory could be particularly useful in some leadership studies.

There is little chance of qualitative methods displacing quantitative tools. Bryman (1998: 8) anticipates more quantitative research in the "Bass" tradition. Many future studies will likely continue to employ quantitative techniques such as the MLQ instrument. However, we predict that methodological hegemony, based on quantitative tools, will diminish and be replaced by a more pluralistic approach to leadership inquiry.

SUMMARY

This paper has addressed both the problematics of, and possibilities for, leadership research. Within each theme three sub-themes were considered.

The problematics of leadership research include three distinct issues. The comprehension problematic pertains to the lack of a clear understanding of leadership. The methodological problematic addresses the fact that quantitative research methods, while they have yielded much data and a great deal of literature, have left many problems in leadership research. Examples include the huge gaps in our knowledge of leadership as well as unresolved issues of validity and reliability. Viz a viz the epistemological problematic, quantitative methods do not seem capable of producing a comprehensive understanding of leadership phenomena. Leadership research is plagued by obsolete assumptions and false claims.

Paradoxically, the possibilities for leadership research appear boundless. Commentators have insisted that future approaches to leadership research be more innovative. The literature contains appeals for more macro perspectives, integration of previous theory, new methods and research strategies as well as diversity in the styles of research that are conducted. In terms of future research projects, commentators identified over 25 areas for investigation. Future studies should include more qualitative, and multiple, methods to fully explore leadership phenomena.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary leadership research is a hostage of two antithetical components. Numerous problematics retard progress. We do not fully appreciate leadership despite extensive research and an enormous body of literature. Overall, our research methods have proven inadequate to yielding a comprehensive understanding of leadership phenomena. Our epistemology is flawed by the presence of obsolete assumptions and false claims about the nature of some research.

In contradistinction, there appear to be possibilities of boundless progress. However, if the promise of new insight is to be realized, leadership research will need integrative frameworks, consolidation of existing theory, and more exploration of leadership processes including leadership development. In addition, the discipline could benefit from new theories, paradigms and research strategies. There is no shortage of topics to investigate. New techniques are also needed: ones that employ qualitative research methods and combinations of approaches from both quantitative and qualitative traditions.

As we embark on a new millennium, leadership research is bedeviled by the twin paradoxes of many problematics and many possibilities. The opportunity for progress is in the hands of research practitioners. Given the irrefutable importance of leadership to societies everywhere, the challenge is daunting.

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