

Leadership studies: All bridges have been burned



Leadership has been a scientific discipline for over 100 years. The magnitude of research has increased tremendously. A variety of leadership concepts and theories has been proposed. Now, I have identified types of leadership theories in order to understand the present fissured state of leadership research.

Leadership theories may be categorised according to the following criteria: (1) theoretical assumptions on organisations, (2) definitions of leadership, (3) focus on explanation versus description and understanding, and (4) method and empirical data. These four classification criteria are chosen because they pinpoint significant differences and contrasts between a number of theories.

Based on these criteria, two groups of leadership theories are identifiable, being fundamentally different with respect to the conceptions of both organisations and leadership. While one group of theories concentrates on **descriptions and understandings or perceptions** of leadership, the other group emphasises **causal relationships between leadership and organisational outcomes**.

The two groups contain several theories. Old and current theories appear in both groups. The aim is not to assess specific theories or approaches with regard to their impact, quality, scientific rigour or relevance. For this very reason the groups have been given labels in order as far as possible to avoid potential associations with something good or bad or new or outdated, namely, the 'leadership effectiveness theories' and 'leadership description theories.' 'The effectiveness theories' focus on the explanation of organisational outcomes and address in particular the causal relationship between leadership and organisational effectiveness.

What I have named 'leadership description theories' or 'leadership process theories' are theories that help us understand what leadership is or how leadership is understood and perceived or the symbolic aspects of leadership. All that matters is that these two kinds of leadership theories are different. And there is a chasm between them.

'Effectiveness theories' represent an outward force or movement *from* the behaviour and actions of the leader with a focus on the tasks the subordinates need to perform *for* the achievement of organisational goals. This kind of leadership theory draws attention to the leadership situation and the organisational context. The formal leaders' main task is to contribute to the attainment of the goals as decided by the owners or principals. The end variable of 'effectiveness theories' is organisational goal-attainment. The scholarship of the 'effectiveness theories' is acknowledged by managers.

The 'process description theories' represent an inward force or movement *from* organisational and societal contexts *into* the leader as a person. The external force or influence comes to the leader through the relationship with the followers. The leader and the follower enter a relationship described as, for instance, one of 'mutual stimulation and elevation.' Leadership is also a matter of how managers construct and describe their leadership. Thus, the end variable of 'description theories' is what goes on in the minds of the leaders, or in the management-of-meaning stance, what reality or meanings end up in the heads of the subordinates. These theories are seldom known to managers. The message of what may also be called 'leadership process theories' has not expanded beyond the understanding and scholarship stored among the researchers themselves.

Scholarship on 'effectiveness theories' pertains to leadership in formal organisations where organisations are perceived as vehicles for the achievement of the goals of the owners, whether they are private or public ones. The scholarship on 'description theories' pertains to leadership in political, religious or social movements and organisations where the goals are those of the leaders or common goals. Theoretical advances in managerial leadership or in political leadership are neither applicable nor beneficial for each other because what leadership is all about and what to lead and whom to lead are fundamentally different.

Additionally, the purpose of 'leadership effectiveness theories', which is to find causal explanations, contrasts sharply with the purpose of 'leadership description theories', which is to describe and understand leadership. The purpose of the latter is in fact to understand a *kind of* leadership that differs from that of leadership effectiveness. The difference between these two groups of leadership scholarship is at its most profound when managerial leadership's focus on organisational effectiveness is confronted with an anti-performance argument.

By acknowledging these contrasts, conflicts and contradictions between 'effectiveness theories' and the 'description theories' we can understand the present state of leadership scholarship. A critical result of these divergent emphases is that the theoretical relationships between these two groups of scholarship appear to have ended. Advancements in one area may no longer be beneficial to other areas. It behoves us to consider the consequences of this present bifurcated state. We ought to take seriously the proposition that leadership researchers, and, in the final analysis, managers, are all losers if the present state prevails.

Sometimes, in conversation with other leadership researchers, I relate some basic concepts and findings in leadership, I notice from their astonished questions how much of what is obvious mainstream scholarship to me is incomprehensible to them. And they are right. All bridges between the 'leadership effectiveness theories' and 'leadership description theories' have been burned.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [Leadership scholarship: all bridges have been burned](#), *Leadership and the Humanities*, 4 (2), 108-125.
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