

The old man and the sea of leadership: looking for effectiveness



Leadership has been a scientific discipline for more than one hundred years. The magnitude of research has increased tremendously. Many different objects of study related to leadership have been investigated with the ambition to solve a variety of problems that appear to be more or less relevant for those in leadership positions.

In this blog post, I present my own description of seven specific areas of leadership scholarship throughout all these years and my reflection upon these theories in light of this fundamental question: What has leadership research really accomplished? These considerations on leadership theories are a product of a lifetime spent on leadership research.

Leadership researchers' very first challenge was to answer questions related to personality traits. Do leaders emerge owing to their personality? What traits make other people perceive one person to be the leader? Leadership emergence studies are numerous. Comparative reviews of published studies concluded that persons who were leaders in some situations may not necessarily be leaders in others. While there were positive correlations between a number of traits and emergent leadership, these correlations were weak. Very weak. Consequently, researchers' attention turned away from personality and looked to behaviour of leaders.

Theories on leadership behaviour are of two conflicting kinds. Some theories are based on the assumption that there is one best way to lead while others claim that leadership effectiveness depends on adjustment to the situation (contingency theories). None of these two kinds of theories have been able to empirically support their arguments.

Some scholars have taken an experience-based perspective by using the activities of experienced managers as the primary data for theorizing about managerial leadership. It is, however, hard to find any evidence of managers having acknowledged and adopted these so-called "descriptive theories."

The descriptions of roles and leadership metaphors appear to be written solely for other researchers. Is organizational effectiveness affected by managers working in different ways? If the purpose is to develop social-science explanations, it is not enough just to collect and repeat the interpretations and explanations that people (e.g., managers) themselves have. Indeed, if the interpretations and explanations of others were the real explanation, there would be no need for social science.

I acknowledge that a problem in leadership research stems from different ideas about what leadership is, and what to lead, and whom to lead. I have always argued that without definitions there could be no rational way of knowing that the study object of leadership exist. It is impossible to find something if you do not know where to look. Admittedly, some researchers disagree on the importance of definitions. How can leadership research progress when the scholars do not agree on what object of study they are supposed to investigate? More than 100 years have now elapsed without any generally accepted definition being formulated.

I was puzzled when I became aware of the renewed interest in personality due to the emergence of transformational and charismatic leadership. I thought that that I would never come across the personality argument again. To me the management of organisations is not about who you are; it is about what you do and accomplish. Additionally, I doubt the logic underpinning the personality argument. If leaders possess special personality traits or combinations of such traits, then how special or unique could they really be?

An estimate is that there are some three million individuals who hold managerial or supervisory positions in the United Kingdom. Again, if the personality argument is valid, it implies that when leaders or managers who possess leadership traits turn up at work, the subordinates will become enthusiastic, the customers will place more orders, the profit margins will rise, and the bank accounts will swell. All these fantastic things occur not because the leader does anything, but simply because the leader possesses some traits. These are not logical arguments.

I have witnessed the transformational leadership theory virtually dominating the scholarship on leadership for almost 40 years. Now, there are nearly as many definitions of transformational leadership as there are researchers in the field. Still we do not know whether organisational effectiveness depends only on transformational leaders or on contingency variables. Today, transformational leadership lacks construct clarity. Moreover, I believe that the collapse of the transformational theory is only a matter of time. To other researchers the collapse has already happened.

I have come to realize that organizational effectiveness is a problematic concept. The only conclusion I dare to draw is that leadership is necessary for the operation of organizations, but leadership cannot explain organizational goal attainment. I suspect in dismay that leadership researchers are looking for something which is not there.

Writing the article (Andersen, 2016) was for me a desperate defense against despair. Maybe we do not have the means to extract the knowledge hidden in leadership. Or, maybe leadership research does not have much knowledge to offer. For some scholars, propositions and hypotheses that are not supported are seen as something positive, for there might be other places to look or other methods to apply.

I am, however, not convinced. Again, what has really been accomplished? Now I wonder: Can I formulate 116 years of leadership research in just one sentence? Then a thought comes to my mind. I have heard it sometime or read it, I cannot quite recall. Suddenly I know from where it came. Stefan Zweig (2013, s. 431) had written: 'And as the train crossed the border I knew, like the patriarch Lot in the Bible, that all behind me was dust and ashes, the past transformed into a pillar of bitter salt.'



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [An Old Man and The "Sea of Leadership"](#), *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 9 (4), 70-81.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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