



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications

Jepson School of Leadership Studies

2011

The Enduring and Elusive Quest for a General Theory of Leadership: Initial Efforts and New Horizons

Georgia J. Sorenson

George R. Goethals

University of Richmond, ggoethal@richmond.edu

Paige Haber

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/jepson-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sorenson, George, George R. Goethals, and Paige Haber. "The Enduring and Elusive Quest for a General Theory of Leadership: Initial Efforts and New Horizons." In *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership*, edited by Alan Bryman, 29-36. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

The Enduring and Elusive Quest for a General Theory of Leadership: Initial Efforts and New Horizons

Georgia Sorenson, George R.
Goethals and Paige Haber

This is my quest, to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far... 'The Impossible Dream' from Man of La Mancha (Darion, 2008)

THE QUEST

When the idea of convening a group of scholars to formulate a general theory of leadership was first proposed, one of those who eventually became a key member remarked that the idea of such a project was 'quixotic.' Professor Joanne Ciulla used the term exactly as it is defined – as the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2009) has it, 'idealistic or romantic without regard to practicality.' What a charming, silly idea. And in the end, the quest and idealism endures but the goal of a general theory remains elusive. However, as Ciulla herself documents, we went far, and learned a great deal along the way.

The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership (GTOL) involves a story about process, and another about product. The story begins with James MacGregor Burns. Burns is a restless scholar who began thinking more generally about the phenomenon of leadership after his Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning classic

Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom was published in 1970. He believed that he would need to expand beyond his familiar disciplines of political science and history in order to fully comprehend the subject. Accordingly, he immersed himself in the fields of philosophy and psychology and in 1978, at age 60, published one of his most influential works, *Leadership*. Burns then became increasingly interested in fostering the study of leadership. He laid the groundwork for the Program in Leadership Studies at Williams College, his *alma mater*, and, in the early 1990s, became closely involved with shaping and establishing the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond and the Center for Political Leadership and Participation at the University of Maryland. In 1997 the center's name was changed to The James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership to honor his lasting contribution to the field.

Writing about leadership and promoting its study was not enough for Burns. He perceived a need for greater intellectual coherence in an extremely wide-ranging field of study and practice. In an interview with Sorenson and Goethals on July 5, 2009, Professor Burns stated that studying leadership in the early years was liberating and took him beyond a focus on biography and politics. He added that the study of leadership demanded intellectual creativity and reach. After

publishing books on Bill Clinton and 'the three Roosevelts' in 1999 and 2001, with Georgia Sorenson and Susan Dunn, respectively, he directly took on the need for theoretical integration in leadership studies. He first approached Sorenson at the Burns Academy and then Al Goethals at Williams College about launching a project to formulate a general theory of leadership. Whatever doubts Sorenson and Goethals may have had about the enterprise were put aside. Both were energized at the prospect of working on another ambitious project with Burns.

The three scholars had learned of each others' work in leadership through the Kellogg Leadership Studies Project (KLSP), a four-year initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation from 1994 to 1998 at the Burns Academy, that for the first time created a community of scholars in the field of leadership studies. In many ways, this research and community of scholars was the seed that made the work on the General Theory possible. What made it necessary was another mutual work by Goethals, Sorenson and Burns, Sage's four-volume 2 million-word *Encyclopedia of Leadership*, which we were just finishing up around the time of the Quest (Goethals and Sorenson, 2004). The encyclopedia had 'morsalized' (to use Burns' term) leadership – there was now a responsibility to pull it back together.

For these and other reasons, Burns, Sorenson and Goethals were all well-acquainted with the faculty at the Jepson School and decided immediately to test the waters of those professors' interest in the endeavor. The Jepson response was characteristic of the whole project. In November 2001, the entire Jepson faculty (then Professors Ciulla, Richard Cuoto, Elizabeth Faier, Gill Hickman, Douglas Hicks, Frederic Jablin, Terry Price and Thomas Wren) met with Burns, Goethals, and Sorenson in Richmond to decide whether it made sense to proceed. Many, if not most, of the Jepson faculty were skeptical, but they all engaged. Ciulla remarked that she had no inclination to work on such an enterprise, but she was curious about why some of her colleagues did. Price was initially extremely dubious about the whole idea, but he wanted to be involved in the discussions, so he joined the party.

During the November meeting a range of difficult questions was discussed in response to Burns' challenge to come up with a general theory, to be used by people studying or practicing leadership, that would provide 'a general guide or orientation – a set of principles that are universal which can then be adapted to different situations.' Keep in mind that this group of scholars was from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives: it included political scientists, anthropologists, historians, philosophers, and

psychologists and scholars from professional schools of education and public administration. At the outset, discussions focused on the nature of theory, on what made a good theory, and whether a theory similar to those in the natural sciences, economics, or other social sciences might serve as a useful model. Many felt that leadership was too multifaceted to be captured in a single theory. Some expressed worry that anything that was generated would exclude something else. Others felt that the multidisciplinary nature of leadership studies and everyone's varying implicit assumptions about human beings, social relations, organizations, and societies doomed the enterprise. But some consensus emerged. The group agreed that a systems approach, incorporating post-Newtonian ideas of causality, was probably more apt to succeed than any linear model. However, many of the most vexing issues were simply set aside. For example, the group talked about the need to clarify whether the theory should be descriptive or prescriptive. The group felt that determining this would be important, but ultimately proceeded without really grappling with that central question.

Strangely perhaps, given that so many reservations and cautions were expressed, the group cheerfully pledged itself to push forward. No one abandoned the project. Rather, the group made specific commitments as to next steps. There would be another meeting at Jepson the following March, of 2002 (which was covered by reporter Katherine Mangan of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) and then a three-day 'no kidding around' working session at Williams College's estate at Mount Hope Farm over the 2002 summer solstice in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Between the initial November meeting and the subsequent March meeting, each member of the working group wrote a short paper outlining principles or phenomena that she or he believed were essential to incorporate, in one way or another, into a general theory. In the March meeting the group continued their discussion of the difficult overarching questions, with no resolution, but also identified the issues they would discuss at Mount Hope. They decided that they must clarify the role of values, leader–follower relations, and power and context, including culture, in the general theory. These, in effect, were seen as the building blocks of an integrated theory.

It is important to note the leader–follower dynamics that carried the group through the first two meetings. Burns was the clear leader, though he insisted on not taking part in the various group discussions but rather joined the group for meals and general conversation. The Mount Hope gathering was managed by Sorenson and Goethals, but what held the group together was Burns' vision.

That vision was that a general theory was attainable, and that this was the group that could formulate it. Even if the goal was unreachable, the effort itself would produce useful results. The group members had enough respect and admiration for all that Burns had achieved that they put their doubts aside and worked as hard as they could to accomplish the mission. Without the group's willingness to follow its leader, despite misgivings, the project would have been abandoned in its very early stages.

So we beat on.... When the group members convened at Mount Hope in June, they were joined by another leadership scholar, Michael Harvey of Washington College in Maryland. Also, Gary Yukl from SUNY Albany was invited to join in some of the discussions. Before the work began, the group completely revised its agenda. Rather than discuss power, values, leader-follower relations, and context, as planned in March, and confirmed in correspondence between the March and June meetings, they decided that they had to address more fundamental questions first: What makes leadership necessary? What makes leadership possible? and What processes characterize the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of leadership?

Addressing these questions took the group back to a theme that was touched on occasionally in earlier meetings, but never fully grappled with. That is: What about the human condition defines the nature of leadership? At first, this question seemed both too basic and too difficult, so the group simply sidestepped it, without explicitly agreeing to do so. But as they thought harder about the overall goal, they knew they must consider the human condition in its most general sense, followed by the question: What about the human condition makes leadership both necessary and possible?

The group worked at Mount Hope for all or parts of five days. At his suggestion, the group worked independently of Burns, who joined them for meals. The group self-organized into three teams and responded to Burns' insistence that something be actually written. Papers were written by the different teams, and on the last day, the entire group discussed them. They felt that they had learned a great deal from each other and gained important insights into the very foundational elements of leadership, but none of the members believed that the group was really any closer to a general theory.

At this point, the group decided that they needed input from other scholars and practitioners. As a result, with the cooperation of the leaders of the International Leadership Association (ILA), they decided to have a plenary session on The General Theory of Leadership at the November

2002 ILA meeting in Seattle. Most of the working group, including Burns, attended the session.

At the 2002 ILA Conference, the group organized the first session on the General Theory. The group elected to interact with members of the audience, using an inductive approach to our theory building: that is, offering a specific case study and engaging with others to construct a theory from its particulars. Using a 1951 desegregation case from Prince Edward County Virginia, the group offered details of the context and actors with the hope of uncovering general concepts about the relationship among causality, change, and leadership that might be generalizable across multiple contexts. The robust audience feedback from this session encouraged the group to build into its scholarly process opportunities to discuss emerging thinking and make sure what they were attempting to do would be helpful to others.

The working group continued to gather input from other scholars and refine its approach. Following Seattle, an expanded group of scholars gathered in Richmond in April 2003 in conjunction with a 10th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Jepson School. Joining the ongoing project were Bruce Avolio from the University of Nebraska, group theorist and practitioner John Johnson, Deborah Meehan from the Leadership Learning Community, Sonia Ospina from NYU, Ronald Riggio from Claremont McKenna College, and Mark Walker from American University. This group attempted to focus attention on issues of theory that had been set aside during earlier meetings. These included the need to define terms clearly, whether a general theory was possible, and whether a social scientific- or humanities-oriented constructivist approach would be more fruitful.

A second ILA session took place in November 2003 in Guadalajara, Mexico. At this meeting, Hickman, Price, Walker, and Wren presented proposals outlining the central elements of a general theory. Then Hickman and Ciulla offered integrative perspectives, attempting to combine the different matrices of elements presented by the first four. As in Seattle, a large audience of ILA members and guests attended the meeting, offered useful feedback and commentary, and encouraged the group to continue their work.

While the meetings in Seattle, Richmond, and Guadalajara were useful and supportive, it became increasingly evident that it was time to write. The group needed less process and more product. It was also apparent to the group by then that they were not going to write a general theory of leadership anytime soon. Their choices were simply to abandon the whole enterprise or write a book summarizing their insights into the key constructs uncovered in the two and a half year quest. As a result, a pivotal meeting was held at the Jepson

School in May 2004. Burns, Sorenson, and Goethals joined the Jepson faculty then participating in the project (Ciulla, Hickman, Hicks, Crystal Hoyt, Jablin, Price, and Wren) and also Richard Couto, who had moved on from Jepson to the new Antioch PhD program, along with Michael Harvey and Mark Walker. Everyone cleared their schedules to make this crucial Saturday meeting possible. Burns made it clear that this was a make-or-break meeting. He was past his 85th birthday and wanted some closure on this endeavor. He put the group on notice that if they didn't have a plan for a book by sundown that day, they would have to quit.

The result of this meeting – somewhat miraculously – was that the group agreed on the plan for the book that was eventually published as *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership* (Goethals and Sorenson, 2006). With very few changes, the outline that many of the group members can still envision on the blackboard in the Jepson Dean's Conference Room found its way almost entirely intact into the book. They thought that the book would have a good home in Ciulla's leadership series for Elgar. It was agreed that Goethals and Sorenson would edit the volume, enforcing deadlines and offering feedback. But, of course, Goethals and Sorenson were backed entirely by the implicit leadership of Burns.

Throughout the quest, a key strategy was to invite comments and suggestions from practitioners. As Burns so convincingly reminded the group, if social activists could integrate the complexity of leadership in real time, they should be able to do so in their theoretical efforts. Accordingly, discussion sessions at the ILA and other meetings with practitioners, such as the February 2004 meeting with members of the Leadership Learning Community in Washington DC, provided insight and course corrections along the way.

Most of the group reconvened at the ILA meeting in Washington, DC in November 2004, where they held another packed session describing the work and inviting feedback. But a cloud loomed over this session. That year's ILA meeting was held within weeks of the tragic murder of a Jepson colleague, Fred Jablin. Nevertheless, the remaining working group persevered. Good progress was discussed at the 2005 ILA meeting in Amsterdam and by the time of the 2006 ILA meeting in Chicago, the book had just been published.

THE FINDINGS

Initially, emerging from the Mount Hope's discussions, was the bedrock view by all concerned that leadership was part and parcel of the

human condition. Were they ever to crack the code, they must start at the beginning. It was, as Harvey suggested, 'a mystery as modern as the nation-state and as ancient as the tribe.' As social and vulnerable animals, humans must form collectives to achieve common purposes.

Groups, whether temporary or enduring, are the Petri dish of leadership. Thus, the group's guiding questions in exploring leadership and the human condition were, as mentioned earlier: 'In the human condition, what makes leadership necessary? And what makes leadership possible?' The group understood, at a deep level, that leadership may enlarge or it may constrict the space for human freedom and imagination – the quintessential aims of leadership.

Operating in the context of human groups, leadership is established by means of influence, or more broadly, power. This consideration started with the members' understanding of power and with forms of power such as force and coercion, as illustrated, for example, in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. The group examined studies on power from those discussed by French and Raven in the 1950s, to more contemporary notions of soft power and charisma. Ultimately, they explored Michel Foucault's analyses of the ubiquity of power in everyday interaction, between human beings everywhere. Always, the focus was on how power that is essentially coercive combines with power that is rooted in positive human relationships. Thus, the multiplicity as well as the ubiquity of power and leadership, came sharply into focus and clearly should be a key construct in the construction of an integrated theory.

But leadership in groups is about more than just power. The *Quest* volume attempted to relate questions of group dynamics, and then in particular the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers, as fully as possible to the fundamental questions of leadership. In doing so, the authors note both the perils and potentials of leadership. Many group forces lead the persons in them to selfish, callous, and even destructive behavior toward outgroups. Leadership can make those problems worse, or a lot better. The group found that a thorough understanding of how leaders behave toward individual group members, and how leaders respond to followers' needs and expectations, helps us appreciate the directions – toward good or ill – on which groups set out.

The fact that group dynamics and leader-follower relations lead to very different outcomes, for different people, underlines the centrality of ethics in contemplating and appreciating the many ways that both leaders and followers think and behave. One important set of questions surrounds degrees of equality vs inequality within groups. Can ethical considerations on the part of both

leaders and followers at least slow harmful tendencies toward inequality, hierarchy, and domination that often are closely entwined in the leadership dynamic? Furthermore, what are the ethical questions that arise not only within groups but also between groups? What are the ethical responsibilities of leadership to the larger world beyond a leader's set of followers? What considerations of inclusiveness and responsibility must a general theory of leadership confront? *Quest* team members and philosophers Price and Hicks addressed these issues in the book and made them critical components of a proposed theoretical direction.

The examination of the ethical dilemmas of group members and leaders toward each other and toward other groups forced the group to confront a critical question within the *Quest* group: namely, whether we held importantly different underlying assumptions regarding the contextual nature of reality and leadership's place within it. Some group members argued that our different viewpoints roughly corresponded to essentialist and constructionist perspectives. They viewed those they termed essentialists as maintaining that social and natural realities exist apart from our view of them: i.e. individuals perceive the world rather than construct it. This can be viewed to contrast with a constructionist view, in which humans construct or create reality and give it meaning through social, economic, and political interactions. The latter perspective was explored more completely by Ospina and Sorenson later in the book. Many in the group argued, especially Hickman and Couto, that understanding our differing assumptions about human nature was key to understanding leadership because these perspectives shape the way we view problems, ask questions, conduct research, construct theories, and create solutions.

While both perspectives operate within the thinking of the group-as-a-whole, scholars who view leadership with an eye toward social change (as opposed to a purely descriptive view of events in a group) lean toward a constructionist perspective. Those scholars employed a definition of change offered by Hickman and Couto in *The Quest*, 'A collective effort by participants to initially modify, alter or transform human social systems.'

Regardless of the utility of an essentialist vs constructionist characterization of scholarly perspectives, the group as a whole was convinced that the human condition, and thus leadership, fundamentally involves meaning making, and that real change – the kind discussed by James MacGregor Burns – involves influencing the meanings that different groups make in the context of competing and conflicting definitions of reality and of value. Real change ultimately involves changes in behavior, but those changes typically follow successful efforts by leadership to reframe or

reconstruct reality. Once people's views of the world change, their readiness to act in that perceived world changes. The *Quest* group recognizes, again, that meaning making happens within group and intergroup contexts, and that leaders' relations with followers provide the crucible in which mutual influence, generally initiated by a leader, results in specific meanings. We come back to questions of ethics by noting that the more normatively oriented scholars among us take ethical stands from which they assess the meaning made and actions taken by specific groups in specific historical and cultural contexts.

AFTER THE QUEST

Leadership is a phenomenon focused on vision, challenge, collaboration, process, and product. It is only natural, then, to inquire what is next for the *Quest*. The group members are often asked the question: 'Will there be a *Quest* II?' and likely the answer to this question varies. This purpose of this section is to examine ways in which the *GTOL* work has been used and examined since the publication of the book in 2006 and to discuss areas for continued development for *GTOL* and leadership studies as a whole.

With the proliferation of leadership programs, books, students, and scholars, *GTOL* was highly anticipated. For many, there was a yearning for greater synthesis in the complex and often-fragmented field of leadership studies. Just like in the *GTOL* group, there are skeptics of the possibility or desire to find a general theory and there are those that feel that it is not only possible, but needed. Regardless of perspective, most agree that *GTOL* propelled the study of leadership further forward. The *GTOL* process and product demonstrates the complex, integrated, and interdisciplinary nature of the field.

Despite the lack of consensus of a general theory, *GTOL* is a significant contribution to the field. It took on large questions and topics of leadership studies and the process of inquiry and collaboration was in itself an act of leadership. *GTOL* also influenced and further developed the authors' thinking about the facets of leadership that they took on and has thus affected their continued work on their subject areas in positive ways. *GTOL* member political scientist Couto shared that the *GTOL* experience has positively influenced his thinking about leadership and has integrated this learning in his continued scholarship on political and civic leadership (Couto, pers comm, 1 July, 2009):

My participation [in *GTOL*] helped me a great deal. I got the chance to examine leadership and

causality and think through systems analysis. That has stayed with me in thinking about the necessary but insufficient role that leadership has in bringing about change.

I also abandoned the idea that leadership requires followership and to accept the idea that leadership means taking initiative on behalf of shared values. Those with whom we share values may be in the same place and time or different places and times, future or past. This definition leaves the task of explaining effective leadership. That I think has to do with the people involved and the time and circumstances of their initiative.

Some of the questions that we laid down in the process of this work stay with me – the nature of authority, the need for it, and the social construction of it. All of this influenced my thought as I took on the role of editor of the SAGE political and civic leadership reference handbook I am completing on Political and Civic Leadership. That work collects a lot of information that would challenge a good theory but also invite it.

Going forward, were we to do so, I see the need to hold on to the existing group but also to infuse it with new resources: a theorist – what does it mean to build theory? People with a command of the field of theory – Susan Komives comes to mind. And people developing important theories of leadership from complexity science, human development studies, and cognitive studies.

Individual chapters (see especially ‘Power’ and ‘Constructionism’), and the book as a whole, have been used in undergraduate and graduate-level leadership studies and business management courses. Students have found the work inviting, accessible, and thought-provoking, furthering their insights about leadership and understanding of leadership as multifaceted and complex.

Professor Heidi Connole, who is Faculty Team Leader in the Executive MBA Program College of Business and Economics at the University of Idaho, talks about her experience using the Quest in her Executive MBA course EMBA 510: *Summer Integrative Experience* during the summer semester of 2008 (Connole, pers comm, 1 July 2009):

The students in this course are allowed to tailor an individual project to their own interests as long as it is integrative and comprehensive (representing the curriculum knowledge acquired during their first year in the program). In this particular case, four students selected a ‘readings group’ around the subject of strategic leadership. We used the Quest for a General Theory of Leadership to launch the readings group and set the stage for the course by demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of this field and its multi-faceted quality.

Sorenson was gracious enough to join us by phone to discuss how the book came into being as a project where the best minds on the subject were drawn together to explore this question of a ‘general theory’ of leadership.

For our students, who are all industry executives, it was especially valuable to be exposed to this idea that there are differences in the conceptualization of what it means to be a leader (particularly at the strategic level). In fact, we structured our readings group seminar around leading in the military, the political arena and the business sphere in order to explore these differences.

Despite a strong background or formal training in academic reading and writing, my students found the Quest for a General Theory of Leadership both accessible and enlightening. Ultimately they used this text and others selected for the readings group to develop personal philosophies of leadership.

Sorenson found that, in her graduate classes in group and organizational dynamics with mid-level career civil servants studying public policy, there was always a group of students who were thirsting for something theoretical about leadership. To these students, the Quest was an oasis. Professor Michael Speer (Speer, pers comm, 2 July, 2009), who worked with a similar cohort, agreed:

I use the book in my masters-level class at the University of Maryland, ‘Leadership in Groups and Organizations.’ By ‘use’ I mean that – I ask the students to read/discuss/learn from a couple of articles (specifically, the ones by Michael Harvey).

As for myself, I use the chapter on group dynamics as the basis for a mini-lecture, and most importantly the book informs how I teach the course overall.

While I sense some disappointment from the authors that the quest did not lead to the grail of a general theory (or even agreement on what general theory is anyway), that fact and condition is also most liberating. Leadership is far from amenable to a checklist, so leaders have to do things like reflect on who they are, how they do or would lead in certain situations, how groups influence what and how a leader can do, etc. So this is, for me and for my class, the exhilarating part of the book. It says to me that leadership and learning about and for leadership is hard work that requires all sorts of thinking and feeling since we do not know nearly all the rules yet, and do not know, even, that there are such rules, or general theory.

The ideas and conclusions of GTOL have been used in works such as Morrill’s book *Strategic Leadership* (Morrill, 2007) and Banks’ book

Dissent and the Failure of Leadership (Banks, 2008) Hickman's new book on *Leading Change* (Hickman, 2009), Sorenson's *Strategic Leadership* (Grandstaff and Sorenson, 2008) and Couto's 2007 edited book *Reflections on Leadership* (Couto, 2007) identify the GTOL work as an important contribution to the progression of the field, charting new territory. The GTOL work is also included in the *Encyclopedia of Leadership*, edited by Goethals and Sorenson (2004).

Interest in identifying an overarching, more general theory and synthesis of leadership has also been explored in other arenas. Roger Gill (Gill, 2006) proposed an 'integrative, holistic model of leadership' which draws on four dimensions of leadership research (intellectual/cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and behavioral) and includes the functions of vision and mission, shared values, empowerment, and strategy. The growing area of integral theory and integral leadership also seeks more holistic understandings and synthesis of consciousness and leadership, especially the work of Ken Wilbur (2000). In a piece examining GTOL through an integral leadership lens, commonalities were identified, particularly around leadership as a complex process, the role of developmental psychology, and the role of the individual and group. The author suggests a transdisciplinary (as opposed to interdisciplinary) approach may have contributed to greater progression in GTOL and advocates for greater inclusion of integral leadership and spiral dynamics.

To some extent, the gauntlet has passed. At ILA in Los Angeles in 2009, University of San Diego Leadership Studies faculty members George Reed and Bob Donmoyer and one of their doctoral students, Paige Haber, organized a session to discuss leadership studies after the Quest. Original Quest members Sorenson and Couto joined them, and Burns joined as a commentator. Couto shared insights from his co-authored chapter on Causality, Change, and Leadership and examined 'generalizations of general theories,' identifying that they are not all that they appear to be. In an effort to extend the GTOL conversation, Couto shared his Quantum Leadership Model, emphasizing the complex and systemic nature of leadership.

Reed shared a model of the nature of different academic fields and their resulting levels of theoretical agreement and coherence, ranging from highly divergent to highly convergent or assimilative levels. In discussing leadership studies in this framework, Reed identified the field as more divergent than convergent. GTOL attempted to push the field toward greater convergence; Reed advocates that the failure to do so is in fact okay. There are downfalls and restrictive characteristics of highly convergent models and thinking, and although often muddy, there is greater creativity

and growth from less agreement and coherence. Donmoyer advocated for challenging traditional ways of viewing fields of study and for introducing new ways of defining and legitimizing leadership studies. Sorenson and Haber discussed future possibilities for GTOL, inviting a new generation of leadership scholars to continue the work. Burns commended the GTOL work and encouraged continued dialogue and exploration of future possibilities with a broader base of scholars, educators, and practitioners.

GTOL and its future continue to be discussed in a variety of arenas. Doctoral students in the USA and abroad are using the GTOL framework to explore issues as diverse as higher education to the judicial system. A new group, 'GTOL II' has emerged in the blogosphere, taking the conversation to the next level (Reyatt, 2009).

The natural question is where to go from here? Whether or not a general theory is ever found and whether or not a general theory is an intended goal, continued work on synthesis and integration of leadership studies will likely contribute to more understanding and more questions. Burns speaks to the 'scatteration' of the field, and more order from this complexity may provide valuable insights and encourage continued conversation across current boundaries.

Burns and others agree that they have given it their 'best shot' and the time has come to pass the work on to new stakeholders and the next generation of leadership scholars. Others believe that some original group members along with new members can help the conversation continue. New voices can bring differing perspectives that are likely to add to the complexity of the discussion, but ideally also the richness.

A criticism of GTOL is the lack of practical application. Including more leadership scholar-practitioners in the conversation can help the GTOL work contribute to leadership in practice and not just in thought. There is also potential for extending the work to a more global arena. Although GTOL was discussed at many ILA conferences, the makeup of the GTOL group came from an American background, albeit one with extensive international experience. Globally accessible technology can help include new, international voices in the conversation as well as provide an avenue for increased dispersion of information.

The GTOL work opens the conversation to interdisciplinary examination of leadership in a clear and needed way. Twenty-five years ago Kellerman (1984) challenged leadership scholars to take an interdisciplinary approach to studying and understanding leadership. This is a challenging and multifaceted approach to take on. Sorenson experienced GTOL as the closest she has come to

working in an interdisciplinary intellectual environment, and the GTOL product is a serious and successful attempt at bridging and integrating these disciplinary silos. From this, continued interdisciplinary conversations and explorations of leadership can take place and a clearer picture of disciplinary overlap and divergence can emerge.

While GTOL covered a great deal of intellectual ground, there are a few areas that could be explored in more depth. The discussion of power could be expanded to greater emphasis on motivation and influence, and the leader–follower relationship discussion can be furthered through exploring relationships between group members (within group) and between leaders (intergroup). Additionally, greater focus on the purpose of the leadership process can be expanded. The inclusion of group relations work may provide some insight into these areas as well as contribute to continued exploration of various levels of the leadership system: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and system as a whole. In reflecting back on the process, one of the authors shared that complexity science, cognitive studies, and human development studies may also provide insight.

GTOL has broadened the leadership studies field, and there is much potential for future growth and development of the conversations it brought forward. Leadership studies must continue to be challenged to move beyond the leader–follower–shared goal conversation. To embrace the complex and adaptive nature of leadership studies and societal leadership challenges, there is a call for more organic, systemic, and integrative ideas and approaches.

It will not be easy, but to end at the beginning, Burns concludes in the *Quest for A General Theory*

Let me leave you with a challenge and a question. The amazing events that unfolded in Montgomery and the state and nation are that the people in action embraced every major aspect of leadership and integrated it: individual leadership, collective leadership, intra-group and inter-group conflict, conflict of strongly held values, power aspects, etc. – and ultimately produced a real change

leading to more change. They made our country a better country. If those activists could integrate the complex processes and elements of leading in practice, in reality, should we not be able to do so in theory?

REFERENCES

- American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edn (2009). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Banks, S.P. (2008) *Dissent and the Failure of Leadership*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, p. 19.
- Burns, J. (2009) Personal Communication, 1 June 2009
- Couto, R. (2007) *Reflections on Leadership*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, p. 1.
- Darion, J. (2008) 'The Impossible Dream, *Man of La Manchi*.
- Gill, R. (2006) *Theory and Practice of Leadership*. London: Sage, p. 91.
- Goethals, G. and Sorenson, G. (eds) (2004) *The Encyclopedia of Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Goethals, G. and Sorenson, G. (eds) (2006) *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership*. Cheltenham; UK: Edward Elgar, pp. 39–153.
- Grandstaff, M. and Sorenson, G. (2008) *Strategic Leadership: A General's Art*. Vienna, VA: Management Concepts.
- Hickman, G. *Leading Change in Multiple Contexts: Concepts and Practices in Organizational, Community, Political, Social, and Global Change Settings*, July 2009, Sage books.
- Mangan, K. (2002) 'Leading the way in leadership: the unending quest of the discipline's founding father, James MacGregor Burns', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 31, p. 39.
- Morrill, R. (2007) *Strategic Leadership: Integrating Strategy and Leadership in Colleges and Universities*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, p. 8, 14.
- Reyatt, K. 2009. *GTOL II – General Theory of Leadership – the Next Phase*. Online. Available at <http://www.iliaspace.org/group/leadershipscholarshipmig/forum/topics/gtol-ii-general-theory-of>. Accessed June 11 2009.
- Sorenson, G. (2007) 'An intellectual history of leadership studies: the role of James MacGregor Burns'. In R. Couto (ed.), *Reflections on Leadership*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, pp. 19–30.
- Wilbur, K. (2000) *A Theory of Everything*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.