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The Historical and Contemporary Contexts of Leadership: A Conceptual Model

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Stating that leadership is a complex phenomenon repeats a truism that is painfully obvious to all who have ever participated in, observed, or analyzed the process as leaders, followers, students or scholars. Despite its inherent complexity, those who seek an understanding of the nature of leadership and leadership processes are well rewarded by the insights generated thereby. This essay provides an expanded conception of one of the key elements of the leadership process—the context of leadership.

It is now well accepted that an understanding of leadership requires careful attention to the contextual aspects of the process. In recent decades, for example, "contingency" theories and models of leadership have paid increasing attention to the impact of the surrounding situation upon the leadership process.[1] As laudable as these efforts have been, they remain inadequate due

to their myopic focus. This essay proposes a model designed to expand the notion of leadership context to embrace the impact of long-term historical forces and the influence of cultural values upon leadership. The study further suggests a procedure whereby these new insights into leadership can be infused into a rational approach to the problems of leadership.

The study of leadership in the twentieth century has been characterized by increasing levels of sophistication. Beginning with the simplistic study of leader traits and progressing to the study of leader behaviors, the focus was initially upon the characteristics and actions of the leader. As thinking about the leadership process has become more sophisticated, the key role played by followers came to be acknowledged and studied. Transactional approaches to leadership such as Hollander's notion of "idiosyncrasy credits" (which are built up by effective leaders in their interactions with their followers), and the exploration of "leader-member exchanges" represent the sorts of insights the study of followers can yield. Indeed, the study of followers and "followership" appears to be something of a growth industry in the leadership studies field.[2]

While such theories have yielded important insights, the most all-encompassing conception of leadership can be found in the models and theories generally grouped together under the rubric "situational-contingency" approaches to leadership. These approaches seek to meld aspects of the leader, followers, and situation into models which help explain the dynamics of the process. Thus, for example, Fiedler's contingency theory includes consideration of such factors as leader-member relations, task structure, and leader position power in determining the appropriate syle of leader behavior, while path-goal theory considers task and environmental characteristics as well as the needs and expectations of the followers.[3]

Acknowledging the many contributions of this train of research (and the above summary is intended only to be illustrative rather than comprehensive), there remain serious omissions. These theories fail to adequately account for larger, more "macro" contextual factors. To be sure, the importance of such variables has not gone completely unrecognized,[4] but the focus has been concentrated upon variables at the organizational level. Little has been done to identify and integrate the larger influences of historical and cultural forces into the broader leadership equation.[5] This lack has not gone unremarked. At the conclusion of her summary of the developments in leadership theory from 1975–1995, Jean Phillips noted that "past leadership research has . . . tended to neglect the importance of the historical context in which

leadership operates."[6] In an earlier survey of the trends of leadership research, Martin Chemers voiced a similar cry to acknowledge the role of the larger culture:
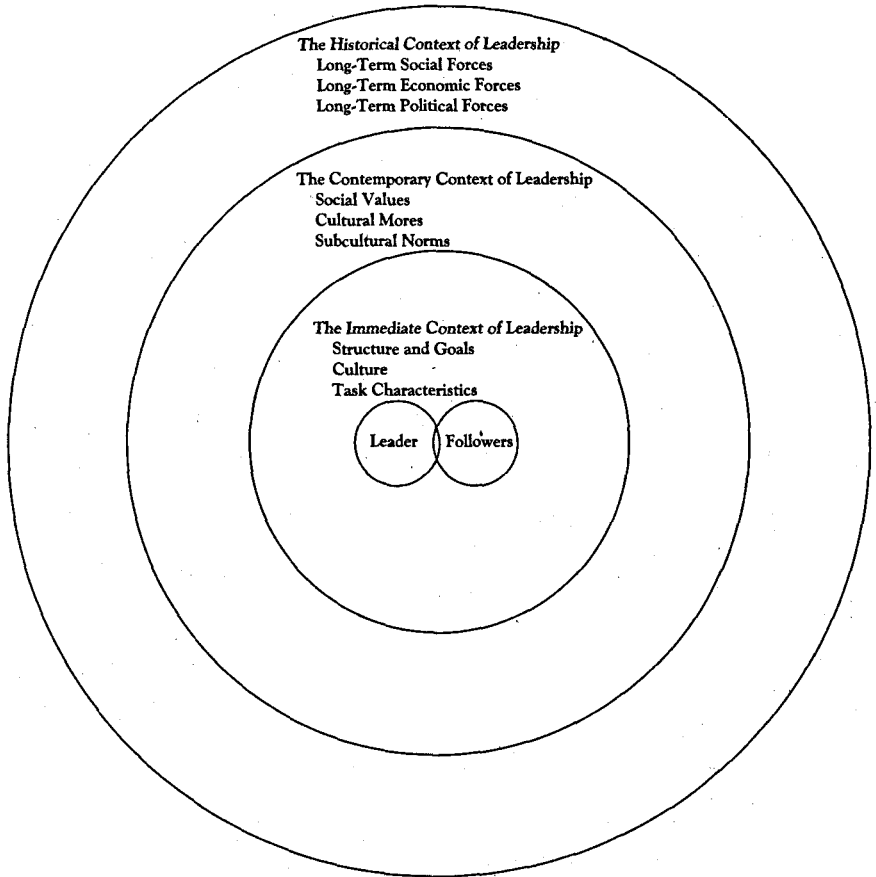
> The next major era of leadership research will begin with the recognition that group and organizational performance are dependent upon the interplay of social systems. A social-systems approach will recognize that the leadership process is a complex, multifaceted network of forces. . . . The small group is further imbedded in an organizational and societal context. . . . If general leadership theory can begin to span the gaps between the various levels of analysis (that is, individual, group, organization, society), the resultant theories will provide us with a much stronger base, not only for understanding leadership but also for improving its quality.[7]

In order to bridge these gaps, the impact of larger macro forces must be acknowledged. Leadership studies needs a model that identifies and affirms the various levels of historical and cultural forces that act upon the leadership process. This essay suggests such a typology.

The model presented here is admittedly simple, yet designed to provide the participant in the leadership process with a conceptual tool to help organize and make relevant the vast array of contextual variables which surround and influence any leadership scenario. The model itself is illustrated in Figure 1. Essentially, it portrays leadership as the interaction of leaders and followers within a sequence of overlapping contextual categories, represented by a series of concentric circles. Each category (the historical context of leadership; the contemporary context of leadership; and the immediate context of leadership) has its own unique attributes that impact the leadership process in distinct ways. By compartmentalizing the situation in this manner, the leader can begin to identify, prioritize, and adapt to the specific demands of his/her particular leadership scenario.

A summary of the impact of these three leadership contexts begins with a discussion of outermost circle, the historical context of leadership. It hardly needs remarking that any contemporary situation is at least partially a product of what has gone before. In leadership terms, however, one must move beyond this truism and begin to identify with some precision the long-term trends and influences which most impact any given leadership scenario, and shape the resulting leadership options. These trends may be long-term social, economic, political, or intellectual developments which operate as limitations on potential leadership solutions.

FIGURE 1
A Model of Leadership Contexts

The Historical Context of Leadership
Long-Term Social Forces
Long-Term Economic Forces
Long-Term Political Forces

The Contemporary Context of Leadership
Social Values
Cultural Mores
Subcultural Norms

The Immediate Context of Leadership
Structure and Goals
Culture
Task Characteristics

Leader   Followers

It is important to note that each leadership scenario has its own unique set of operative historical forces, each of which may have a distinct impact. To draw upon an historical example, the leadership options available to the leaders of Boston society on the eve of the American Revolution were severely constrained by long-term historical developments. Economically, a century of population pressure on the surrounding hinterland had filled Boston with a "rabble" of extremely poor, unemployed, and restive inhabitants. Bostonian society was highly stratified, and becoming more so. This recipe for unrest was flavored by decades of intellectual ferment which seemed to justify rebellion. It is small wonder, perhaps, that the conservative, rational responses to British aggravation counseled by leading citizen Thomas Hutchinson were

swept away in the emotional fury encouraged by agitator Samuel Adams. Adams, a ne'er-do-well, ended up as governor, while Hutchinson, a member of the colony's elite with a history of service, ended up in exile.[8] In sum, Samuel Adams and his approach to leadership best fitted the demands of the times—demands which were largely a function of long-term developments.

A more recent example is provided by David J. Rothman in his 1993 article entitled "A Century of Failure: Health Care Reform in America."[9] Rothman argues that "to understand fully the persistent failure of the United States to enact national health insurance requires an appreciation not only of government and the dynamics of politics but of underlying social realities."[10] In support of his point Rothman cites longstanding American beliefs about the proper role of government, and an ethos of volunteerism. The history of the health care issue provides more specific insights. Beginning in the 1930s, the dominant political interest group in America—the middle class—has been co-opted on the health care issue by such health care providers as physicians and Blue Cross. The middle class, in other words, has never perceived it to be in its best interests to back national health care. Leaders who wish to enact such legislation can ignore this historical backdrop only at their own peril.

The second context category, the "contemporary" context of leadership, is closely related to the first. The term "contemporary context" of leadership represents the norms, values, and customs of the surrounding society—in short, the impact of cultural mores. Examples of the impact of societal values upon leadership can readily be seen in the political realm. In the American political debate of the 1990s, the polar star of all those aspiring to succeed is the value structure of the middle class. Although ill-defined, the middle class is the dominant political interest of contemporary politics. One of the most important political developments of the 1990s has been a perceived shift in middle class perceptions of self. Barbara Ehrenreich was one of the first to herald this change in her 1989 book *Fear of Falling*, in which she argued that the current middle class is insecure and deeply anxious about maintaining its status.[11] An analysis of the American political scene by Joe Klein in 1993 echoes this theme, suggesting that the essential challenge of American politics of the 1990s is facing up to what he called "The Big Fear"—the concern of the middle class for its future.[12] Rothman, in his study of the health care issue, agrees, and notes the policy implications:

[There is a] persistence of a narrowed vision of middle-class politics. With no largesse of spirit, with no sense of mutual responsibility, the middle classes—

and their representatives—may advocate only minimal changes designed to provide protection only for them, not those in more desperate straits.[13]

Dispute regarding some of the specific conclusions of these authors undoubtedly exists, but their insights into the connection between societal values and the viable options open to political leaders are an example of the role of the contemporary context of leadership.

Nor are such influences restricted to the political realm. The leadership of all groups and entities is affected by societal values. Another obvious example is the multinational corporation. Geert Hofstede has demonstrated this with great clarity in his study of leadership in various cultures. Hofstede has studied the cultural contexts and histories of numerous nations, and concluded that the sorts of leadership values favored in the United States, *i.e.*, a stress on the individual, the confidence in market processes, and the focus on managers, are not well-received in many parts of the world. With the increasingly multinational character of most business operations, leaders who wish to succeed must attend to these cultural nuances.[14]

To add to the complexity of the analysis, it is significant to note that the contemporary sphere is not limited to the societal level. Societies are made up of countless subcultures that impact upon the leadership of each particular group. The values of these subcultures can generate quite specific expectations of leaders. For example, leadership in traditional Japanese-American subcultures is the province of the older generations,[15] just as ministers have been the expected leaders of the American civil rights movement.[16] In the domain of non-profit organizations and philanthropies, the leaders who are commonly identified and developed are those who demonstrate certain attributes—wealth, work, and wisdom—which reflect the needs and values of those sorts of organizations. Any careful consideration of a leadership environment must take into account the potential influence of subcultures. ·

The final context of leadership is the one undoubtedly most familiar, the "immediate context" of leadership, which embraces all those more "micro" situational factors which have such an impact upon leadership. These include, but are not limited to, the structure and goals of the group or organization, the culture of the organization itself, and the nature of the task at hand. These factors, when combined with the idiosyncrasies of the leader and followers, are the stuff of the contingency theories of leadership mentioned earlier. They need not detain us here.

In summary, the conceptual model outlined above is designed to bring

prominence to several contextual factors which are often overlooked in efforts to analyze and diagnose the possibilities and constraints of any leadership scenario. Although it adds to the complexity of the analysis, ignoring such contextual influences risks failure in achieving leadership goals.

A conceptual model of the sort outlined above helps sort out the broad categories of contextual influences upon leadership. Such a model becomes more beneficial when supplemented by a structured procedure which helps the leader to identify and isolate the specific relevant historical and cultural influences that impact his or her unique leadership situation. The purpose of this final section is to suggest a protocol of questions that any leader can utilize to diagnose the historical and cultural factors which must be confronted and handled.

The questions set out below are quite simple and obvious; unfortunately, few leaders appear to pose them, and as a result, often overlook key environmental factors of their leadership situation. The questions:

1. Who are the important players in this leadership situation?
2. What are their interests/aspirations?
3. What aspects of the historical background threaten or challenge these interests/aspirations?
4. What aspects of the historical background support these interests/aspirations?
5. How do societal beliefs and values impinge, favorably or unfavorably, upon these interests/aspirations?
6. What cultural or subcultural precedents have been established that might influence these interests/aspirations?
7. How can my followers and I use this knowledge to maximize the potential for achieving our mutual goals?

It should be noted that this "environmental scan" purposely includes *all* interested parties, even (perhaps especially) those who might be opposed to one's interests. This approach is similar to the premise underlying Fisher, Ury, and Patton's conception of proper conflict resolution strategies. In their model of "principled negotiation", a knowledge of the true interests and demands upon all parties is the key to a successful resolution of any conflict.[17] So too here; the leader who can use this protocol to uncover the historical and cultural constraints which imbue any leadership situation will be best able to act constructively within those constraints.

The foregoing has been a brief overview of a perceived weakness in existing conceptions of the leadership process, together with a simple model intended as an initial remedy. The model has been operationalized so that leaders and followers facing the inevitable challenges to the achievement of group goals can diagnose the nature of the problems facing them. The ultimate objective of this article is to lead to a better and more rational leadership process in which mutual goals are more easily achieved.