

Leadership and the Changing World of Work: A review, a critique and new directions

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Abstract

Although there is an extensive body of research on leadership, findings on the effectiveness of different leadership styles within the changing world of work are inconsistently inconclusive. No one style of leadership has been shown to consistently reshape people's behaviours and render organisational members' interactions more effective in the changing world of work.

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive systematic literature review and critique with the view to develop a more comprehensive understanding of emerging leadership and change patterns. To be able to do so, we investigate the extent to which the theoretical propositions on leadership styles' positive (or effective) impacts within the context of the changing world of work is supported. We are particularly interested in looking into the extent to which leadership styles can sustain effective organisational change within the world of work.

Keywords: leadership, leadership style, change, work, effectiveness

Track: Leadership and Leadership Development Track

Word Count: 1990

Introduction

The number of published research studies in the field of leadership is vast spanning several decades. However, despite the numerous scholarly contributions, the concept of leadership and its contribution to the changing world of work remains elusive. Despite considerable research investments from governments and organisations alike, knowledge gaps on leadership's contribution to the changing nature of contemporary work still abound because of inadequate and incomprehensive information (Harrison, 2018; Leitch et al., 2009). In addition, leadership and organisational change theories are plagued by the absence of a definitional consensus. Many theories have emerged about leadership and organisational change over the years, prompting some scholars to purport that there are as many theories of leadership and organisational change as there are leaders and change agents (Gill, 2011, Harrison, 2018).

The major theories which can be identified in leadership studies are the great man, trait, skill, behavior/style, contingency, implicit leadership, leader-member exchange, servant, charismatic, transactional, transformational, distributed, authentic, and entrepreneurial leadership. On the other hand, organisational change experts have highlighted a plethora of models and theories such as Kotter's (1997) 8 Step Process, Lewin's (1947) Force Field Model, Barratt-Pugh and Gakere's (2011) change agency, Kjaerbeck's (2017) and Mendy's (2020) positioning theories. Of these models and theories, the behavioural or style approach to leadership has been perceived by scholars to be of great relevance within specific situations of organisational change. However, the lack of agreement and inconsistencies in research on what types of leadership traits are most effective within the changing world of work has led researchers to pay greater attention to what leaders actually do in a planned and methodical process rather than on what inherent leadership traits could make an effective difference.

Leadership Style

Leadership style literature has focused on how leaders behave towards subordinates contextually (Northouse, 2010; Wright, 1996). The literature defines it as the behaviour or actions of leaders (Northouse, 2010). The practical relevance of the topic has led to scholars' examination of different styles of leadership in the hope that this will bring about effective organisational change (e.g. Lewin et al, 1939; Burnes, 2003; Kahn, 1956; Blake and Mouton, 1985; Judge et al., 2004). These styles vary between democratic and authoritarian to team and country club management. However, the problem is that most prior studies have examined leadership behaviours individually rather than focusing on how patterns of specific behaviours account for effectiveness in specific organisational change situations (Yukl, 2010). In general, the research findings on the effectiveness of different leadership styles in the changing world of work remains, at best, inconsistent and mystifying (Mendy, 2019). No one style of leadership has been shown to consistently produce effectiveness in terms of optimizing members' performativity interactions especially within the changing world of work (Yukl, 2010).

In this study, we intend to conduct a theoretical review and critical analysis of the literature on leadership, and the styles therein, to investigate their potential impacts (effective or otherwise) within the context of the changing world of work. We are particularly interested in looking into the extent to which various leadership styles can lead to the introduction and sustainability of effective change within the world of work (Gill, 2002) especially within certain engrained organizational cultural backgrounds (Ahn et al., 2004). Although the emerging literature highlights the importance of aspects such as strategic leadership (Marshall, 2019), transformational leadership (Hechanova & Cementina-Olpoc, 2013; McKnight, 2013) and even ethical leadership (Burnes et al., 2012), the literature is divided regarding employees' complicity and compliance with the new change requirements (Mendy, 2019). Therefore,

despite all the innovative propositions to date (Hao & Yazdanifard, 2015) we still do not know whether leadership and its various styles can actually bring about an effective and sustainable, incrementally planned change outcome as claimed (Carter et al., 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to examine and understand how leadership impacts on change given the limited attempts in this area (Holten and Brenner, 2015). We aim to review and critique the theoretical propositions of the effectiveness of leadership styles within organizational change by undertaking a systematic literature review with the aim of highlighting new research directions in leadership and change management studies and debates (Mendy, 2020).

The literature review process is central within any form of academic enquiry and provides a key tool within management research (Harrison et al., 2016). The aim of conducting a systematic literature review is to enable a researcher to “map and assess the existing intellectual territory and to specify a research question to develop the existing body of knowledge further” (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 208). However, most studies on leadership styles have followed the narrative approach, even though such an approach has been criticised for lacking criticality (Clark et al., 2019; Harrison et al, 2016; Tranfield et al., 2003; Denyer and Tranfield, 2009) and setting out new trajectories and developments (Clark et al, 2019; Sawyerr and Harrison, 2020). As a result, a more systematic approach to the review of literature is proposed (Sawyerr and Harrison, 2020; Vázquez-Carrasco and López-Pérez, 2013) to highlight what scholars have missed in the combined critique of leadership and change.

The SLR will involve a three stage review process. This will involve planning the review, conducting the review and reporting and dissemination. In planning the review, a review protocol will be developed consisting of the review questions to be addressed, the population focus of the study as well as the criteria for literature inclusion and exclusion. After which, the

review will be conducted based on the keywords and search strings agreed by the review panel with expertise on leadership and organizational change. The searches for the papers will be conducted in eight data bases, which have been identified as the most suitable for management research (Harrison et al, 2016). After this research stage, the papers would go through various levels of screening to obtain the final number which will be quantitatively and theoretically analyzed.

To make sense of the leadership and change management notions, we intend to investigate how these are (re)produced in contemporary organisations and, by extension, contemporary society according to the literature and research. We aim to extend the current leadership style literature on how to implement effective and sustainable change in organisations in a state of flux. Such extension is done through using examples from extant theories and debates on the topic, developing an alternative to current theorization, identifying areas in need of further development and research and widening the theoretical frame to include literature from non-Western contexts to highlight a new research agenda for leadership and organizational change studies.

Further Development

This research is currently at its early stages. Despite this, we have identified a clear plan that will facilitate the identification of new developments and directions in the chosen field. Having conducted a scoping study and narrative literature review to map out and better understand the emerging theoretical trends, we will further develop and systematise the conducted literature review in order to produce a conceptual framework of leadership styles within the changing context of work. These will serve as our contributions to this emerging area of scholarly work.

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