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Organisational Leadership: Introduction to the Special Issue

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While leadership is one of the most talked about and researched topics in business and management, it is also one of the most contested and poorly understood. Half a century ago, Stogdill (1974, p. 259) famously said, “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.” Since then, despite a huge expansion in leadership research and development, limited progress has been made towards a robust and consistent definition.

Grint (2005) calls leadership an ‘essentially contested concept’, as differing interpretations arise not simply from empirical variations, but from the fundamentally different ways in which the concept is conceived - as a *personal* property, as *positional* responsibility, as the *result* of successful organising, or as a *process* of social influence. Each of these perspectives leads to very different approaches to recognising, rewarding and developing ‘leadership’.

Despite the range of ways in which leadership is conceived there is an inherent tendency towards a ‘leader-centric’ approach that associates it with the characteristics, competencies and/or behaviours of specific individuals. Drath et al. (2008) note that nearly all theories of leadership are based on the fundamental building blocks of *leaders*, *followers* and shared *goals* (what Bennis, 2007 refers to as the ‘leadership tripod’) and suggest a shift in focus towards the outcomes of *direction*, *alignment* and *commitment*. It is possible to think of numerous examples of where direction, alignment and commitment exist without the existence of clearly identifiable leaders, followers and/or goals. Raelin (2003), for example, talks of ‘leaderful organisations’, where people collaborate to achieve shared outcomes without a clear distinction between leaders and followers. Harms and Han (2019) talk of ‘algorithmic leadership’, where workers are allocated tasks and evaluated on the basis of automated apps rather than the direct intervention of a leader. Western (2014) outlines ‘autonomist leadership’, where the power differentials implied in ‘leader-follower’ relations are rejected and everyone plays their part in ‘leading’ the community. And Ospina and Foldy (2010) talk of leadership in social movements, where there may be no explicit leaders or followers, and not even a clearly defined shared goal, but nonetheless extensive collaboration and coordination to mobilise social change.

These are just some examples of an emerging body of work that encourages us to think differently about leadership – to consider it as a complex process of social influence that extends far beyond ‘leaders’ and/or ‘organisations’ (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Such works tend to view leadership as ‘socially constructed’ – emerging through the ways in which people make sense of their relationships and contexts, rather than as some pre-existing strategy or social order. When looking at leadership in this way we may be alerted to the importance of considering leadership as multi-level construct – with insights to be gained by looking at it from the perspective of individuals, groups, organisations, systems, places, communities and/or societies (Bolden et al., 2023; Sutherland et al., 2022) - each of which is interconnected and interdependent.

In this special issue, we focus on the topic of organisational leadership. The call for papers was intentionally quite broad, recognising that what happens in organisations is influenced by societal trends and issues, as well as the particular characteristics of individuals and teams. The diversity of contributions attests to the breadth and complexity of this topic. Following a rigorous review process six submissions were accepted for publication, including an expert viewpoint paper, three empirical research papers, a systematic literature review and a book review, as summarised below.

This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Professor J.A.S.K. Jayakody and opens with a celebration of his life and work. Professor Jayakody was an influential member of the academic community in Sri Lanka and a committed leadership researcher, educator and practitioner. His approach exemplifies engaged scholarship and the characteristics of inclusive and compassionate leadership. As a thought leader, Professor Jayakody demonstrated exceptional insight and foresight, challenging established theories and assumptions, and pushing the boundaries of understanding of Management Research among Sri Lankan academics. He is sorely missed.

The dedication is followed by an expert viewpoint article, in which Ruth Turner reflects on her insights as Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Board Director, entrepreneur, coach, consultant, campaigner and advisor to a Prime Minister. Along with Jonathan Gosling, Emeritus Professor, Ruth considers three levels of analysis and action for leaders, subalterns and leadership developers - personal, collective and contextual – suggesting that leaders should pay attention to their *character*, the *company* they keep and the *context* they work in. Through paying closer attention to these three domains, it is proposed, that leaders can better prepare themselves and their organisations to navigate their way through crisis and uncertainty.

The first empirical paper, by Rashmi Dias and Pavithra Kailasapathy, outlines the development and validation of a measure for effective leadership in Sri Lanka. They take a cross-cultural perspective to identify seven behaviours and traits (motivation, guidance, communication, decision making, empathy, and integrity and change management) that are associated with effective leadership in a Sri Lankan cultural context. The resultant framework should be of value to leadership researchers, practitioners and developers in this part of the world to assess leadership capacity and performance within their organisations. It may also form a useful basis for comparative work and the development of culturally appropriate measures in other regions.

In the second research paper Peter Stephenson, presents findings from a project on how female entrepreneurs make sense of the concept of authenticity in leadership. His work supports recent critiques of the notion of ‘authentic leadership theory’ (Walumba et al., 2008) – revealing contradictions and inconsistencies in how these ideas are conceived and deployed in both theory and practice. Instead, he calls for a refocussing on ‘authenticity in leadership’ which makes greater allowance for the ethical dilemmas and identity dynamics of leadership in practice.

The third empirical paper, by Fidèle Mutwarasibo, presents insights on the experiences of Racialised Minority Leaders (RMLs) in navigating the boundaries between self-interest, organisational interests and the welfare of racialised minorities. This research, conducted in the United Kingdom, was informed by Critical Race Theory and uses an autoethnographic approach to explore the behaviours of RMLs in gatekeeper positions. It attempts to provide some 'racial literacy' for service providers who need to rethink, at the very least, their recruitment choices when attempting to engage the services of RMLs. It concludes the potential role the RML gatekeepers can play in supporting service providers in delivering services to marginalised RM communities.

The paper by Margaret Sonia Loyola and B. Aiswarya provides a systematic review of the literature on followership in organisational leadership studies. Follower-centred research has emerged in response to the leader-centrism outlined earlier and focuses on when, why and how people follow. The paper outlines foundational research in this field, as well as more recent and emerging scholarship. It concludes by suggesting that the journey of followership studies has evolved through the adoption of various research approaches that explore the role of followers and following in leadership. These studies have progressed from solely considering followers from the leader's perspective to incorporating followers' own views and experiences. This recognition has led to the development of followership studies in recent work highlighting the active role of followers in effective organisational leadership. This indicates the importance of further in-depth study in this area as a distinct body of scholarship in its own right.

Finally, Muhammad Shahzeb Khan, provides a review of the recently published second edition of *Organisational Leadership* by John Bratton, outlining key themes and ways in which the book may be of value to different audiences.

Together these papers illustrate the richness and complexity of leadership in organisations, as well as the importance of thinking differently if we are to respond effectively and inclusively to global trends and challenges. Whilst all papers encourage us to look beyond the characteristics and behaviours of individual leaders, they also show these to be important and integral parts of the leadership process, alongside the societal context in which they operate. In effect, organisational leadership sits at the interface between individual and societal perspectives in leadership. This is what makes it both so important but also so challenging. We hope you find much food for thought within this special issue and are inspired to engage

with renewed energy and commitment to leadership in whichever contexts you encounter it.

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