Which Leadership Principles Currently Have The Most Appeal: Leadership in the Light of Contemporary Popular Leadership Literature

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Purpose: This study aims to identify principles and critical elements of leadership reflected in contemporary popular leadership literature.

Study design/methodology/approach: In a quantitative-qualitative study, the main topics of leadership are extracted from business bestseller lists to infer the issues in leadership that have the most significant popular resonance.

Findings: Current popular business literature focuses on the leader as a person, respectively, on the personality of the leader, and in particular on transformational leadership, including elements of transactional leadership.

Originality/value: Examining contemporary popular leadership literature and interrogating it for underlying leadership principles and models breaks new ground in scholarly research.

Key words: leadership; transformational; transactional; great man; theory

Introduction

What type of leadership is best, how to measure leadership effectiveness, and whether there is a particular leadership for particular situations or times have been debated at length for many years. With more than 1500 definitions of leadership (Kellerman, 2012) and more than 66 leadership theories (Mango, 2018) the question is whether there is a tendency for a particular approach, or at least principles, to be repeated and from which a meta-theory could be derived in the larger scheme of things. After all, the practitioner's question remains highly relevant: what type of leadership is most purposeful for a particular organization, and how can it be learned? Usually, scholars approach this question deductively to bring the different theories into a structure or to derive a new framework from the synopsis of all views (Dansereau et al., 2013; Dinh et al., 2014; Meuser, J. D. et al., 2016; Zhao & Li, 2019). This study takes a reverse approach. Inductively, from observing which leadership models have appeal and prevalence, it aims to infer or examine what evidence there is of leadership, what type of leadership is prevalent, or what type of leadership principles currently resonate most. An indication of what type of leadership is recognized and prevalent can be found from the prevailing models in popular leadership literature. The underlying basic assumption is that the spread of a topic in popular literature can be used to conclude issues that resonate with people at the time. The prevalence of a subject can be inferred from the sales figures of a particular book, respectively of books on the same topic. This dissemination, in turn, can be measured by bestseller lists. Now, in the very confusing global book market, there are not many publicly accessible bestseller lists relevant to the topic of leadership. One recognized institution that has been measuring bestsellers for many years, making them visible to a submarket and publishing them, is the New York Times bestseller list on the subject of business. It also accurately describes the methodology used (The New York Times, 2022a). Since the bestseller list is updated weekly, respectively monthly, a period of more than three years was chosen for this study to observe and investigate in the long term whether there is a particular type of leadership reflected in the related books. The category "business" is broadly defined at NYT. Hence, there are books on more personal mindset topics, from biographies to explicit leadership books. Basically, leadership clues can be derived from all subjects. However, those books with a more explicit

leadership theme will be examined more closely. The scope of NYT is the American book market. Therefore, the result of the study is also limited to this market. However, many of the books have been translated multinationally, and English language books in general and the American market, in particular, have a global influence (Schneider, 2017). The limitations of this approach will be addressed. Before doing so, however, it will be explained how exactly this empirical study proceeds.

Methodology

The New York Times Bestseller List is made up entirely of sales from the United States of America. It is formed from sales figures of books from tens of thousands of different shops across the country (The New York Times, 2022a). Monthly bestseller lists are formed from these figures, both from local shops and online retailers (Times Insider, 2020). Separate bestseller lists are compiled for different areas and topics, such as science fiction and non-fictional, respectively. For this paper, all new monthly top-ten business books (The New York Times, 2022b) from the three-year period January 2018 to April 2021 were compiled.

In total, 95 books made it onto the monthly renewed top-ten New York Times business bestseller list one or more times during this period.

In a first quantitative examination, an overview is created of the number of times each book makes it onto the top ten. Then a ranking is created from the lists of those books that made it onto the top ten more than twice, and a qualitative overview of the topics is created.

Finally, the books that explicitly deal with the topic of leadership are evaluated twice: first concerning the person of the leader and then with regard to the criteriology of transformational/transactional leadership as the methodology that is most common and best known: "Of all the leadership theories in organizational research, charismatic/transformational leadership has captured scholars' interest most over the past decade." (Judge, T. A. et al., 2006).

The criteriology of evaluation

Each book was evaluated according to the following criteria:

- o The question of whether leaders are born or made continues to preoccupy scholarly research today. The tendency prevailing in the 19th and 20th centuries to describe leaders as heroes (Carlyle, 1895; Galton, 1869), who are different from others virtually from birth, has been taken up, changed, and also rejected again and again in the course of history of leadership theories. The trait theory is based on the assumption that the leader's personality and his or her character traits are essential - regardless of whether they were inherited or learned (Zaccaro, 2007). Kirkpatrick and Locke describe that leaders need the proper personal condition: "Regardless of whether leaders are born or made or some combination of both, it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people. Leaders do not have to be great men or women by being intellectual geniuses or omniscient prophets to succeed, but they do need to have the "right stuff" and this stuff is not equally present in all people. ... We believe that in the realm of leadership (and in every other realm), the individual does matter." (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Therefore, the criteriology for the influence of personality on leadership success is based on the simple question of whether the leader's personality plays a role alongside the other evaluation criteria in the respective book.
- o Transactional vs Transformational Leadership: With a confusing number of leadership theories and methodologies, the category Transactional/Transformational can be applied to almost any theory. Even if Bernhard Bass in the Full Range Leadership Model

describes transactional and transformational rather as poles of a continuum (Bass & Riggio, 2005), the following elements of a criteriology can be selected for this study:

1. Transactional leadership consists of management-by-exception, and contingent reward in external motivational control: (external) goals are set, and the achievement of the goals is rewarded for controlling desired behaviour. External goal setting and reward through goal achievement are the main qualities of this leadership style.
2. Transformational leadership, with the four areas of Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration, emphasizes the role-modelling of the leader and the visionary development of the employee, aiming at intrinsic motivation control.

Discussion

Which type of leadership is currently most discussed and meets with the highest response is an interesting question. For this purpose, bestseller lists are examined in a quantitative-qualitative study. The NYT bestseller list gives a good insight into the sales figures of books in the American market. Many titles that deal with business topics in a broader sense are declared as business books. It is interesting to see which topics are most famous outside explicit leadership. The extent to which marketing, author recognition, or even elements such as the design or title of the book are variables in the sales figures must be examined elsewhere. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the length of time it takes for a book to find itself on the bestseller list is an indication that the subject is appealing.

Before examining the books that explicitly deal with leadership, an overview of those that have made it to the top-ten more than twice will be given. Of the 95 books, 53 have made it to a top 10 ranking more than once and 42 only once. Only 28 books have made it to a top 10 ranking more than twice. Those that appear in the ranking only once or twice in the top 10 are excluded from the study. The reason for this is that it may be assumed that with a marketing offensive, one could manage to make it into the top ten once or twice, regardless of the quality of the book, but that the better known the book becomes, pure marketing can no longer be the sole deciding factor for a higher ranking, but rather the fact of whether the topic and style of the book meet with a great response. An example can support this thesis: Jocko Willink, (2020a) made it to the top-ten only three times with "Discipline equals freedom," while "Extreme Ownership" (Willink & Babin, 2017) by the same author made it to 34 times. One may assume that the marketing for both books was similar. Nevertheless, one title makes it to the bestseller list considerably more often! This means that pure marketing cannot be responsible for whether a book is frequently found among the top ten but that the frequency correlates with the topic's relevance (and the writing style).

Table 1: Numbers and percentage of books on respective places 1-10

# books	#1-10	% N95
53	2	.55
28	3	.29
20	4	.21
17	5	.18
13	8	.14
11	9	.12
9	10	.09
8	20	.08
7	21	.07
5	22	.05

4	29	.04
3	30	.03
1	34	.01

While 53 of 95 books made the top ten at least twice (55%), there is a big jump to the number of 28 books that made it at least three times (29%). Only nine books (9%) stay on the top-ten of the NYT bestseller list for at least ten weeks for more than three years.

The next step is to examine the content of the books that are not directly related to leadership to determine whether there are recurring themes and whether there are themes that can nevertheless be related to leadership. To this end, the following criteriology was established in order to be able to encompass both overlaps with leadership in the broadest sense and the main statements of the respective books: Does the book in question have to do with self-development, can the content be subsumed under the thematic complex of Mindset and Behaviour, is it a book that deals more explicitly with leadership, is it a biographical book, is it about entrepreneurship, political, economy or social topics or does it deal with gender in the broadest sense.

Given the topic of this study, it makes sense first to examine the books that do not deal explicitly with leadership and then - in more depth - to look at those that deal more explicitly with leadership.

Table 2: Top 28 books according to different topics

1-10	Author	Book	topics						
			S	M	L	B	E	P	G
3	Willink (2020b)	Leadership strategy and tactics			x				
3	Zakaria (2021)	Ten lessons for a post-pandemic world						x	
3	Gowdy (2020)	Doesn't hurt to ask	x	x					
3	Wambach (2019)	Wolfpack				x			x
3	Bayer (2021)	Best self	x	x					
3	Gaines (2017)	Capital Gaines				x	x		
3	Ferriss (2017)	Tribe of mentors	x						
3	Willink (2020a)	Discipline equals freedom	x	x					
4	Doerr (2018)	Measure what matters			x				
4	Gaines (2016)	The magnolia story				x	x		
4	Pink (2019)	When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing	x	x					
5	Scott (2019)	Radical Candor			x				
5	Sinek (2019)	The infinite game		x			x		
5	Duhigg (2014)	The Power of habit		x					
5	Sincero (2013)	You are a badass at making money	x						
8	Goodwin (2018)	Leadership in turbulent times			x				
8	Epstein (2020)	Range	x						
9	Sethi (2019)	I Will Teach You to Be Rich	x						
9	Knight (2019)	Shoe Dog				x	x		
10	Iger (2019)	The Ride of a Lifetime			x				
20	Carreyrou (2020)	Bad Blood				x	x		
21	Dalio (2017)	Principles			x				
21	Duckworth (2017)	Grit	x						
22	Gladwell (2009)	Outliers	x	x					
29	Kahneman (2012)	Thinking, Fast and Slow		x					
30	Brown (2018)	Dare to lead			x				
30	Clear (2018)	Atomic habits	x	x					
34	Willink & Babin (2017)	Extreme Ownership			x				
			11	9	8	5	5	1	1

S = Self-development; M= Mindset and Behavior; L = Leadership; B = Biography; E = Entrepreneurship; P = Political/Economical/Social; G = Gender

Interestingly, traditional business topics are hardly represented. In contrast, all topics related to self-development, the understanding of mindset and behavior, and the understanding of persons, for example, in biographical books or among those that can be assigned to "entrepreneurship," meet with great resonance.

Concerning the second criteriology of this study, whether the personality of the leader matters, this question can be answered in the affirmative. Half of the books deal with "soft" topics such as self-development and mindset and behavior - independent of the topic of leadership. The fact that two examples of the top bestsellers can prove the person of the leader matters:

The bestseller Atomic habits (Clear, 2018) is about changing habits. Leadership is concerned with behavioral and habitual change, both in the person of the leader himself, at least in transformational leadership, and concerning followers. A leader who cannot change will have difficulties changing other people or even an entire organization. Therefore, one may deduce that the Ability to change is an essential topic for leaders, which a leader should integrate into his or her personality.

Daniel Kahnemann's „thinking, fast and slow" (Kahneman, 2012) has been ranked 1-10 on the NYT bestseller list 29 times. Even though it is not a leadership book as such, it offers many insights that can be important for leaders, especially concerning transformational leadership. For example, the basic assumption that we think in two systems points to decision-making mechanisms in leaders: there is the emotional decision that is not always aware of its preconditions (system 1) and the logical, conscious, and reflected decision (system 2) that tries to make the most informed decisions possible. Becoming aware of one's own cognitive biases could be extracted as a vital element of transformational leadership.

Overall, it can be concluded that the person matters in leadership and that topics of self-development and mindset/behavior are of great importance in the business context.

After examining those books that did not directly deal with leadership in the first step, the deeper analysis now focuses on books that explicitly deal with leadership.

From the three-year approach, nine books could be distilled that represent a complete leadership theory approach or at least elements of a leadership theory. Since the three top-sellers (Brown, 2018; Dalio, 2017; Willink & Babin, 2017) have by far the most frequent ranking, they will be particularly examined.

First, however, it will be explored whether the person of the leader plays a role in the book, then the books will be examined according to the criteria for transactional and transformational leadership.

Table 3: books and personality

1-10	Author	Book	Personality
3	Willink (2020b)	Leadership strategy and tactics	x
4	Doerr (2018)	Measure what matters	
5	Scott (2019)	Radical Candor	x
8	Goodwin (2018)	Leadership in turbulent times	x
10	Iger (2019)	The Ride of a Lifetime	x
21	Dalio (2017)	Principles	x
30	Brown (2018)	Dare to lead	x
34	Willink and Babin (2017)	Extreme Ownership	x

Whether and to what extent the manager's personality is essential can be positively assessed for all books except Doerr, (2018), who presents the methodology of Objectives and Key Results (OKR) in his book. This will be discussed using the three top-sellers as examples: Dalio (2017) mentions, for example, trust, fault-friendliness, truth, and respect as leadership and management principles, respectively. These values are person-driven, and the leader's

personality is central to the design of the principles. Brown (2018) also starts with the person of the leader in the fundamental conception of leadership when she describes the primary skills of the leader as vulnerability, empathy, values, trust, and integrity. As the title of the top seller, "Extreme Ownership" by Willink and Babin (2017), already suggests, it is about leadership responsibility. Ownership means taking responsibility for mistakes, being a role model, managing one's ego, constantly reflecting on one's personality, and working on oneself.

The other study criteriology concerns the distinction between transactional and transformational leadership, which is widely recognized and forms a broad basis for the study, especially with the continuum (Bass & Riggio, 2005). Transactional leadership is widely described as management-by-exception and contingent reward in external motivational control. External Goalsetting (EG) and External Reward (ER) were taken as the main criteria for this study. The following descriptions further define the four levels of transformational leadership: Idealised Influence means being cheerful, charismatic, and a role model. Inspirational Motivation refers to inspiration, motivation, visionary goal-setting, and innovation. Intellectual Stimulation consists of creativity and autonomy. Furthermore, Individualized Consideration refers to individualized needs and intrinsic motivation.

Interestingly, it can be seen that all books discuss at least elements of transformational leadership, and five out of eight also describe transactional leadership elements. Therefore, current popular leadership literature focuses on transformational leadership, but that transactional leadership is not entirely left out.

Since the three best-selling books on leadership are far ahead of the others, their content will be examined separately and in more detail:

Ray Dalio is an American entrepreneur, founder of the world's largest hedge fund firm, and ranked 36th on the Forbes list of the world's wealthiest people in 2021 (Forbes, 2022). In Principles Dalio (2017) describes the principles and rules that have helped him in life. The guiding working principles are: working for what you want; comping up with the best independent opinions, stress-testing opinions, being wary about overconfidence, embracing reality. A straightforward goal achievement process consists of setting goals, identifying problems, diagnosing root causes, designing a plan, and doing the plan's tasks. His management principles are truth; transparency; meaningful work, failure friendly culture; get in synch what is true, create responsibility; recognize differences of people, hire right, manage to achieve goals, probe deep, evaluate people accurately, provide experiences, be specific about problems, remember the 80/20 rule.

The main themes show that leadership is transactional with external goal setting and external reward, and transformational influencing, motivating, stimulating, and looking at the individual.

„Dare to lead" (Brown, 2018) shows a transformational leadership approach without transactional elements. It deals with vulnerability, values, trust, learning, and resilience. Brené Brown teaches at the University of Houston and is best known for her publications on vulnerability. There is no evidence of a leadership style referencing external goal setting or external reward. In contrast, all the elements of transformational leadership are very pronounced. The fact that leaders should also be role-model in showing their weaknesses, that they drive innovation, exemplify autonomy, and have a view of the individual are all elements of transformational leadership.

Retired US Navy SEAL officer Jocko Willink has founded a consulting firm and is known for his book Extreme Ownership, which he wrote with his former colleague Leif Babin (Willink & Babin, 2017). Willink again shows elements of both leadership styles, although there is also a

preference for the transformational one. On the one hand, the transformational leader is in the foreground, who takes people along on the journey and ultimately assumes responsibility, and on the other hand, clear (also extrinsic) goals are set.

It is noticeable in all three top sellers that the authors are not unknown and can each score points with a unique vita so that it becomes clear once again that the person matters.

Table 4: books according to transactional/transformational leadership

#	Author	Book	transactional		transformational			
			external goal setting	external reward	II	IM	IS	IC
3	Willink (2020b)	Leadership strategy and tactics	x	x	x	x	x	x
4	Doerr (2018)	Measure what matters	x	x	x	x		
5	Scott (2019)	Racical Candor	x	x	x	x	x	x
8	Goodwin (2018)	Leadership in turbulent times			x	x		x
10	Iger (2019)	The ride of a lifetime			x		x	x
21	Dalio (2017)	Principles	x	x	x	x	x	x
30	Brown (2018)	Dare to lead			x	x	x	x
34	Willink & Babin (2017)	Extreme Ownership	x	x	x	x	x	x

II = Idealized Influence; IM = Inspirational Motivation, IS = Intellectual Stimulation; IC = Individualized Consideration

Conclusion and further research

This study aims to determine which type of leadership is most widespread and recognized. For this purpose, an inductive empirical approach was chosen. Based on the sales figures of bestsellers in the business sector in the American book market, books were identified over three years that were repeatedly on this list, i.e., whose sales figures were high over a more extended period. As shown, it can be assumed that those books that sell a lot and frequently have good marketing but are also appealing in terms of content and therefore give indications of what kind of leadership meets with great resonance at the current time. First of all, it could be shown that, interestingly enough, classic business topics are hardly represented in the area of "business."

In contrast, all topics that have to do with self-development, the understanding of mindset and behavior, and the understanding of personality and character meet with great resonance. The examination of those top sellers that are explicitly dedicated to the topic of leadership, either in part or as a whole, shows that on the one hand, personality plays a significant role in leadership and on the other hand, transformational leadership, with significant influence from elements of transactional leadership, meets with the most extraordinary resonance. The implications for both practical implementation and further research are enormous. On the one hand, further research should be done on the significance of the leader's person for training and recruiting. Should more be invested in personality development than in skill enhancement is one of the fundamental questions. Finally, the importance of transformational leadership should not be underestimated. This is also about fundamental training issues, followership, and an environment that supports a certain kind of leadership. Furthermore, it should be examined in other formats whether the theses can also be confirmed in similar studies in other markets and whether empirical observations in companies also speak for a confirmation.

Limitations

This study is based on print media. Due to the increase in non-print media, for example, on social platforms, via blogs, podcasts, videos, etc., it can be asked quite fundamentally whether others are not overtaking print media's information strength and penetration. However, whether

e-books have not long replaced printed books can be clearly answered in the negative, c.f. the comprehensive and fascinating study on bestsellers (Yucesoy et al., 2018).

Furthermore, it is limiting to note that leadership models are not necessarily disseminated through distinct leadership books. There may be books that are not declared as leadership books but strongly influence managers' leadership behavior. On the other hand, large corporations, for example, may promote a particular leadership model that can be traced back to a specific book without influencing the book's sales figures.

It should be remembered once again that an assumption for the dissemination of the model cannot necessarily be made from the sales figures. In other words: A high sales figure does not necessarily mean that the book has been read, understood, and, above all, implemented. With 3000 publishing houses in Germany alone, it is not easy to find out from all the publishing houses in the world whether and which leadership books they publish, especially since the sales figures are not usually public. Beyond this, however, it can be stated that there are attributes, particularly in the area of transformational leadership, that are demonstrably culture-independent or cross-cultural (DenHartog, D. N. et al., 1999) so that it can be assumed that essential leadership elements recognized in the US are also spreading in other countries.

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