

6.2: What is Leadership?

Learning Objectives

1. Define and describe leadership

When you hear the word “leadership” what comes to mind? Is it Superman, with amazing abilities to overcome almost all obstacles combined with altruism and his concern for humanity? Is it Lara Croft, the fictional video game character who solves all her own problems and doesn’t need anyone to save her as she is no “damsel in distress?” Is it the action movie hero, alone against all odds, the rises from the ashes victorious? Is it the person who, observing that someone is choking and cannot breathe, performs the Heimlich maneuver, dislodging the obstruction and saving someone’s life? Or finally, is the person who gets up every morning, helps others at their tasks and on their way, who juggles two jobs and more responsibilities than they can count, and still remains accessible, helpful, and caring day after day? You might answer all of the above and to a certain extent you would be correct, but we need to examine these distinct expressions of leadership to learn from each one.

Superman represents the ideal hero for some, with a combination of strength and virtue. Natural born leaders have been discussed, explored, and investigated time and time again across history. It was once thought that a leader was born, not made, but the evidence indicates otherwise. What makes a leader is complicated and not easy to define. Across cultures leadership is considered many things, and requires many different, if not opposing, behaviors. There is no universal standard, trait, or quality that makes a leader, but still people sometimes look to a strong leader to solve their problems. Some cultures have embraced a single person’s leadership without checks or balances, like Stalin or Hitler, only to learn devastating lessons that cost millions of lives. There is no superman.

Therefore, what does make a leader? Is it a combination of talents (that you are born with) and skills (that you learn in life)? Ligon, Hunter, and Mumford (Ligon, G.S., Hunter, S.T. & Mumford, M.D. (2008). Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19 (3) 312–334) explore exceptional leaders in *Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach*. Their goal was to further understanding of how different childhood and young adult experiences may impact leadership, searching for identifiable patterns in predicting different types of leadership. Their conclusion may surprise you: what makes a leader across contexts are individuals who, in the presence of a crisis or challenge, can formulate and implement a plan of action. Leadership, therefore, is the ability to effectively formulate and implement a plan of action based on the context. The person who calls 911 when someone appears to have a heart attack has observed and assessed the situation, and creates a rational plan to address the current crisis. What might be normally considered a simple phone call, in this context, becomes of paramount importance. The ability to provide a location or street address, or describe observations, or even perform CPR while emergency services are in route are all examples of leadership in action. Even if the person doesn’t know CPR, the act of asking people in the area if anyone knows CPR and can help is matching needs to skill sets, an important aspect of leadership. Leadership can be demonstrated in your own life or can involve teams and groups.

There is no universal definition of leadership. Across cultures what we consider leadership varies greatly, and yet we know it when we see it. We are not born with it, but our experiences can influence our ability to act when the context demands action. To state that leadership is a mystery is an understatement. We cannot define it, and yet we can recognize it. So we start to use terms to describe what we observe and arrive at a definition, and then try to explain it, predict it, and develop it.

Throughout history, many people have speculated about leadership and its nature. Howe, (Howe, W. (1996). Leadership vistas: From the constraints of the behavioral sciences to emancipation through the humanities. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 3(2), 32–69) for example, proposes the field of leadership is too narrowly viewed and challenges to be open to leadership in its many forms. This complexity makes it difficult for researchers, authors, or philosophers to arrive at a common definition of leadership. The behavioral sciences have been the home of many of these investigations, but as the field grows, leadership itself is increasingly considered a cross-disciplinary concept.

The study of leadership began with the focus on control and hierarchy, (House, R. J., & Aditya, R. N. (1997). The social scientific study of leadership: Quo vadis? *Journal of Management*, 23 (3), 409–473) but that is changing. For example, Mendenhall, Osland, Bird, Oddou, and Mazneyski, (Mendenhall, M., Osland, J., Bird, A., Oddou, G., & Mazneyski, M. (2008). *Global leadership: Research, practice, and development*. New York: NY: Routledge) explored global leadership and attempted to define a universal leader. They observed a shift from hierarchical leadership (the boss tells you what to do and how to do it) to a more participatory leadership (the boss discusses the task with the team as they formulate a plan). The ancient view of global leadership was one of domination, commanding followers, and clear demonstrations of the power of a leader. This reflected a more of authoritarian style

than a participative style of leadership that we observe today. According to Rajah, Song and Arvey, (Rajah, R., Song, Z. & Arvey, R., A., (2011). Emotionality and leadership: Taking stock of the past decade of research. *Leadership Quarterly*, 22, 1107–1119) there a current shift from the perceptive of a leaders' controlling perspective to one of the followers' participatory perspective. Across fields, leadership is increasingly perceived as a dynamic relationship involving leader-follower behaviors. Today, issues such as diversity, gender, culture, and ethics are increasingly considered relevant, even critical, elements of leadership. Day and Antonakis, (Day, D., & Antonakis, J. (2012) *The nature of leadership: Second edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.) suggest a new paradigm where leadership is, in fact, just starting to be understood as a hybrid approach that combines insights, frameworks, strategies, and approaches across disciplines.

As globalization increases and our interconnected world becomes smaller, there is a growing appreciation for the role of an effective leader in terms of vision, success, and overall organization effectiveness. Leaders are required to possess increasingly complex skill sets and are expected to effectively communicate with individuals, groups and teams, and within and between organizations. This gives rise to the central question: how best to prepare or develop effective leaders? Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber (Avolio, B., Walumbwa, F., & Weber, T. (2009) Leadership: Current Theories, Research, Future Direction Annual Review of Psychology 60 (2009), pp. 421–449; doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.16362) provide a developmental approach, conceptualizing authentic leadership as a pattern of leadership behavior that develops from a combination of positive psychological qualities and strong ethics. Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, (Avolio, B., Walumbwa, F., & Weber, T. (2009) Leadership: Current Theories, Research, Future Direction Annual Review of Psychology 60 (2009), pp. 421–449; doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.16362) also suggest that leadership is composed of four distinct but related components; self-awareness, internalized moral perspectives, balanced processing, and relational transparency.

We can observe that leadership has been investigated, and that it has many factors, but we are still challenged to fully answer our central question: what is leadership? We'll conclude with a term from the US Navy: deckplate leadership. Get out of the office and get on the deckplates. It means that, in order to get the job done an effective leader has to be on the deck of the ship, interacting and learning what are the challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities present, emphasizing both task orientation with relationship. That takes initiative, self-motivation, skills, and talent, all elements of effective leadership. You, as a student, are taking charge of your education. As we proceed in our exploration of leadership remember to get up, get out, and see the many examples of leadership all around you.

Key Takeaway

Leadership traits, situational leadership, functional leadership, and transformative leadership comprise four key approaches to leadership theory.

Exercise 6.2.1

1. What has been your experience to date as a leader? Discuss your thoughts with your classmates.
2. Describe a leader that you know or have known in the past that you perceived as skilled or effective. How did they act and what did they do that was inspirational? Write a 2–3 paragraph discussion of your experience and share it with a classmate.
3. Think of a leader you were challenged to follow or perceived as ineffective. What did they do or say that was ineffective? How would you characterize this leader's style (use descriptive terms) and why? Please share your observations with your classmates.

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