

A short history of leadership theories

By Gene Early

Our world is changing and so is our understanding of leadership. From the Great Man Theory of the 19th century, to new research on genetic factors underpinning leadership behaviours, there's a wealth of data to examine.

Gene Early, a Leaders' Quest partner, has explored the history of leadership theory, and what it teaches us about current trends. His conclusion? That our awareness of the interconnected world has led to an appreciation of the systemic nature of contemporary issues.

In today's globalised world, what demands do leaders of complex organisations face? And what role can true system leadership play?

Great Man Theory (1840 onwards)

The focus here is on *leader as hero*, as described by Thomas Carlyle in 1840. Herbert Spencer (a fellow Victorian) later expressed a contrasting view that heroic leaders are the product of their time and its prevailing social conditions. Although Carlyle is credited with initiating this phase of theorising, many before him wrote that a leader was born, not made. Plato, Lao-tzu, Aristotle – and even Machiavelli – each contributed to this way of thinking.

Though the historic timeline consistently plants the Great Man Theory in the 19th century, we can see its deep roots present in many of today's practical assumptions about leadership. While there are minor adjustments, the *heroic leader* remains rooted in individualistic cultures. Iconic figures continue to capture our imagination, whether they be Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, or Nelson Mandela; Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, or Elon Musk; Albert Einstein, Norman Borlaug or Stephen Hawking.

The shift today is toward system leaders – individuals who have the expertise to contribute and who recognise that “wicked problems” can only be solved through collaboration. Even so, many people – followers and leaders – still hold fast to the assumptions underpinning Great Man Theory, and this influences their cultural behaviour.

Trait Theory (1910-1948)

The paradigm shifted with the realisation that the identified traits lacked consistency. In part, this was because no relationship was established between the traits and leadership, and the context of the leader was not considered. The turning point was Stogdill's (1948) survey of 25 years of research, in which he concluded, "A person does not become a leader by virtue of the possession of some combination of traits."

As a result, leadership research shifted away from traits (the internal factor) and towards behaviours – the external expression of leadership. However, the assumption that leaders have certain traits continues, and is once more being studied. Today's researchers find correlations between certain *personality characteristics* (charisma, extroversion, conscientiousness, integrity, and achievement motivation) and *leadership*. With advanced research methodologies – including neuroscience – there is a renewed sense that defined traits can be used to identify potential leaders, explain leadership and play a part in its development.

Behavioural Theory (1950-1970)

The shift in thinking here was, "If we can't nail down the internal traits, we can look at the external behaviours of leaders." As attention moved to behavioural expressions of leadership, the nature vs. nurture question came to the fore. Are you born – or can you learn – to be a leader? With this new emphasis, and under the right conditions, leaders were seen to emerge as a product of their environment, as well as their nature. Two studies (Katz, Maccoby, Gurin and Floor in 1951, and Stogdill and Coons in 1957) identified two primary considerations: task-oriented vs. relationship-oriented leadership. Engagement with followers also became relevant. However, there was still no consistency in behaviours across tasks or situations. In other words, the variables of context confounded the findings. This led to a new focus – on contingency theory.

Contingency Theory (1967-1990)

Contingency theories were developed to account for these contextual variables. They took account of the people involved, tasks required, situation experienced, nature of the organisation, and other environmental factors. This research acknowledged that no single style of leadership was universally appropriate. It's often the case that the successful turnaround leader struggles in a mature and stable organisational context, just as a leader who flourishes in a stable environment may flounder in a turnaround situation. Fiedler (1967, 1971), who is recognised as one of the trailblazers in this area, identified three managerial components: leader-member relations, task structure, and position power. Some contexts favoured leaders who were task-oriented, and some favoured those who were relationship-oriented. Hershey and Blanchard's situational research (1969) suggested that developmental levels of individuals influenced their leadership styles. Other researchers continued their exploration until interest in this area began to dry up...not surprisingly, with the aging of its foremost proponents.

Leader-Follower Theory (1990 onwards)

The role of followers (a contextual variable) was a natural extension of contingency theory. This was a significant departure from the Great Man Theory and its concept of heroic individuals leading from the front.

One lasting influence prior to this era is Robert Greenleaf's work on Servant Leadership (1970), which emphasised the choice of certain leaders to "serve" their followers, empowering them to live and work to their full potential. As Greenleaf wrote, "The best test and difficult to administer is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?"

Leader-member exchange theory is another example (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Here, high quality relations are characterised by trust and respect between leader and follower, while those of lower quality coincide with transactional and contractual obligations. High quality relations are empirically shown to produce better leader outcomes. (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007).

Transformational Leadership Theory (1985-2010)

James MacGregor Burns' classic work, *Leadership* (1978), introduced the concept of transforming – rather than transactional – leadership. While both are needed, he focused on "...a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents." This mutuality deepens the work of leader-follower theories, and adds a moral dimension. His work influenced many – most notably Bernard Bass (1985, 1998). He detailed the structure of transformational leadership to include: 1) idealised behaviours (walking the talk), 2) inspirational motivation (offering a compelling vision), 3) intellectual stimulation (approaching problems from multiple angles), and 4) idealised attributes (showing strong character in working for the good of the whole).

New Directions in Theory (2010 onwards)

Contextual school of leadership

New contextual factors now being considered include: national culture, hierarchical levels of leadership, gender, race, etc. Contextual factors are seen to empower – or inhibit – leadership behaviours and outcomes.

Ethics and moral development

Researchers are looking at the influence of ethics and morals on the behaviour of leaders (and on organisational outcomes).

Biology and neuroscience

Work is being done on “behavioural genetics of leadership emergence, leadership role occupancy, effect of hormones on correlates of leadership, neuroscience perspectives, evolutionary points of view, integrative biological perspectives, and the sociobiology of leadership...” (Day and Antonakis, 2011).

System Leadership Theory (2015 onwards)

Our awareness of the interconnected world has led to an appreciation of the systemic nature of contemporary issues (Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, 2015). System leadership recognises that collaboration is essential to solve wicked problems (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, Kania, and Kramer, 2004).

Building on decades of leadership research and practice, and raising questions about our collective responsibility for solving wicked problems, we can understand some of the characteristics of – and need for – true system leadership. Much like Jim Collins’ Level 5 leaders (2001), they have deep humility and fierce professional resolve. The difference is that they have moved *from* individual *to* collaborative responsibility for the whole. Ego is sacrificed for the common good. The consideration of multiple points of view is essential. Envisioning and creating the future together replaces reactivity. External constraints and obstacles are *engaged within leaders* in order to be resolved for the system itself. The valuing of emergent insights deepens trust and disciplines action. Individual – and collective – development leads to system development.

In 2014, Frederic Laloux’s *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness* gave us fresh insight into the changing requirements for leadership in organisations.

He offers the metaphor of the organisation as a living system, acknowledging its modern day complexity within our dynamic social and economic culture. Just as Senge et al have noted, an individual, working alone, is unable to satisfy today’s mix of personal, organisational, and global demands. Leaders at every level in these cutting-edge organisations are recognised by relinquishment of personal ego and organisational control, trust in their colleagues and organisational systems. These factors allow them to self-organise for the good of the whole – with an emphasis on authenticity, collaboration, and distributed authority.

Conclusion

This short history of leadership theory allows us to step back and think about the demands placed on leaders today. Several observations are relevant.

First, these different approaches help us focus on individual traits, the behaviours associated with successful leadership, the relevant context or situation, the nature of followers (and their relationship to the leader), the type of influence that is brought to bear (transactional vs. transforming), and the collaboration required to address tough issues.

Second, we recognise the interconnectivity of our globalizing world and the complexity of organisational leadership. As a result, it is no surprise that system leadership is today's cutting-edge theory. In this context, the importance of optimising the potential of every player in the system becomes apparent. Different players will have different roles. The expectation that they will lead from their own strengths – and that their contributions will be recognised and leveraged – is a significant shift from historical patterns of hierarchical leadership models.

Third, we acknowledge the speed of change in so many areas of our cultural and organisational life. Add to the mix the different perspectives, values, and behaviour patterns of emerging generations, and it's clear that we need flexibility of mindset and action – as well as emotional intelligence. As a consequence, we all need to fathom deeper levels of humility – about what we know as leaders, how we interact with others (within our organisation, customers, or other stakeholders), and ultimately why we are doing what we are doing.

This is the challenge we face - and it's well worth embracing.



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