Advancing Leadership Research: The Pursuit of Fundamental Principles

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Abstract

Future research needs are informed by recent theory developments, trends, and specific interests that promise to impact and advance knowledge, while benefiting both the research and practitioner communities. In this theoretical review of the state of leadership research, I review recent research trends to identify areas of interest across the research community, seeking to identify subjects that have receive significant attention from the research community, examine research subjects that have high potential for advancing leadership understanding and practice, and propose two particular research arenas for immediate further inquiry, authentic leadership and emotional intelligence. The proposed research areas were selected not only for their potential to advance leadership understanding, but due to the theories' relationships with other leadership theories and indications the theories may be a core construct of effective leadership. Further investigation of authentic leadership is proposed because authentic leadership shares core values with a wide range of contemporary leadership theories, and has even been proposed as a root construct for effective leadership (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005) rendering further research of high potential for advancing theoretical leadership understanding. Emotional intelligence is surrounded by controversy as the practitioner community rushes forward with applying the theory in leadership and organizational development settings, while the research community debates the empirical support and lack of discriminant validity relative to personality and intelligence. Research of emotional intelligence is advocated to resolve the theoretical controversy and further inform the practitioner community.

Keywords: Leadership trends, leadership research, authentic leadership, emotional intelligence.

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Profound changes are challenging global leaders as the 21st Century unfolds (Perrin, et al., 2012) with societal changes, technological advances, high-visibility scandals, and globalization shaping demands for new types of leaders and leadership approaches (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). The environmental changes are occurring while scholars continue work to define even the core constructs of the leadership phenomena and describe effective methods to influence leadership success (Dinh, et al., 2014; Esu & Inyang, 2010). Leadership development is likewise in its infancy with attempts to train behaviors, coach self-awareness, or apply constructivist approaches encouraging leaders to reframe their leadership around themselves and organizational conditions, but despite significant investments and efforts, leadership quality remains a concern (Esu & Inyang, 2010). While the amount of scholarly research on leadership has increased dramatically, there remains limited empirical support for many of the complex constructs surrounding leaders and their relationships to organizations and followers (Metcalf & Benn, 2013).

Leadership literature is filled with "contradictions and complexities" (Esu & Inyang, 2010, p. 115), but since "leadership is a complex phenomenon that operates across multiple levels of analysis, involves multiple mediating and moderating factors, and takes place over substantial periods of time" (Dinh, et al., 2014, p. 37), challenges in understanding and operationalizing theories are unsurprising. Even defining leadership has yielded multiple descriptions with most incorporating concepts of influence across a social network to accomplish collective objectives, and integrating the multiple elements of people, creativity, diversity, self-awareness, and strategic needs (Perrin, et al., 2012). Management and leadership are being recognized as unique concepts with managers making and executing plans and programs (Perrin,

et al., 2012), while leaders focus on reframing financial, operational, cultural and values-based concepts and perceptions (Esu & Inyang, 2010). Managers tend toward control, processes and tactical performance, while leaders focus on influence, change, vision, and trust (Esu & Inyang, 2010).

The increasing volume of leadership research addressing traits, behaviors, and context are advancing leadership understanding, but many compelling questions remain unanswered. The current environment is one of accelerating complexity driven by globalization, widespread multi-culturalism, rapid technological advances, and generational changes making leadership more and more challenging. A review of recent research indicated what researchers have prioritized and offered insight into what areas of inquiry may hold future potential.

Research Trends

Dinh et al. (2014) reviewed original leadership research published in ten major journals since 2000 and analyzed theories, methods, and even qualitative and quantitative techniques applied. The most significant researched categories and trends within established theories included:

- Charismatic and transformational leadership
- Follower cognition and leader expectations including implicit leadership theory (ILT)
- Social exchange and relational leadership theories including LMX
- Leader traits but almost exclusively with other antecedents and with traits investigated as mediators or moderators.
- Cross-cultural and diversity theories
- Shared leadership theories

- A very little research on behavioral leadership approaches and contingency theories (Dinh, et al., 2014).

Classified as emerging theories, Dinh et al. (2014) identified categories of research conducted including:

- Strategic leadership which was the most prolific of emerging theories

- Team leadership, often combined with other constructs and social aspects of leaders.

- Systems and network theories including complexity and contextual theories.

- Change and dynamic leadership research

- Leader development and leader emergence

- Ethical and moral leadership theories including authentic, ethical, servant, and spiritual leadership

- Emotional intelligence (EI) with most research on EI within the last 5 years.

The breadth of recent research reinforces that leadership is a complex, multi-faceted concept with varied dimensions including culture, values, identities, behaviors, modeling, cognitive processes, emotions, group behaviors, and time (Dinh, et al., 2014). Those leadership elements operate in complex, changing organizational environments with complicated social networks of leaders, followers, and others. Historically, a lot of leadership research focused only on a small slice of leadership and a very short time-frame with cross-sectional survey methods typically employed (Dinh, et al., 2014), but recent trends are toward more integrated research approaches which also consider followers, groups, and multiple antecedents simultaneously (Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, & Avey, 2009).

Integrated leadership research to explore complex interactions and fundamental antecedents to success have expanded significantly in recent years, and there has also been a shift from popular practitioner interests to scientific inquiry especially as it relates to the skills, training, and experience useful in developing desirable leadership (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). While the complex combinations of leadership concepts including cultural, behavioral, emotional, cognitive and social elements make it difficult to organize and reconcile various theories, perspectives, and levels of analysis, trends suggest that leadership is more about who a leader is rather than what a leader does (Dinh, et al., 2014). Leaders influence followers through core values, ethics, altruism, and the study of such leader essentials offer great promise in unraveling the leadership conundrum. Two areas of future research hold particular promise for unveiling what some have posited as core leadership fundamentals, authentic leadership and emotional intelligence.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) posited that ethics must "lie at the heart of leadership" (p. 94), and authentic leadership has been proposed as a root construct that influences leaders across multiple leader styles and behaviors (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009) to create trust and consequently effectiveness. Understanding such a fundamental concept can broadly inform researchers as they seek to unravel other multiple-dimensions antecedents to effective leadership. Emotional intelligence is also an important subject for future research since proponents have suggested that emotional intelligence similarly underlies a wide range of leadership behaviors and relationships (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Antonakis, 2004; Killian, 2012) suggesting it is also a fundamental characteristic. Unlike authentic leadership that evolved primarily from scientific research, emotional intelligence was more influenced by practitioner theory and leader development programs accompanied by significant debate in the research community over whether emotional

intelligence is a unique construct or simply an element of intelligence and personality

(Antonakis, 2004). There remain widespread support in the practitioner community for

emotional intelligence, yet theorists continue to conflict over the constructs core definition and

research supporting emotional intelligence as essential for effective leadership has been

challenged. One of the most significant debate surrounds whether emotional intelligence is a

unique antecedent to leadership, or is simple a popular repackaging of intelligence and

personality by the consultant community. Naysayers have argued that emotional intelligence as

defined lacks discriminant validity relative to personality and intelligence. Research is necessary

to determine if emotional intelligence encompasses constructs beyond the currently defined and

measured intelligence and personality, if so what are those unique constructs, how can they be

measured, what are the unique effects of emotional intelligence in leadership, and can emotional

intelligence be effectively developed or is it more core attribute. Such questions on emotional

intelligence will steer researchers into the ongoing "born or made" arena of debate.

Authentic Leadership

Many contemporary leadership theories including transformational leadership,

charismatic leadership, servant leadership, and spiritual leadership appear to have considerable

overlap, suggesting shared constructs of ethics and values (Walumbwa et al., 2008). These

altruistic theories are effective in creating trust and overcoming the residual cynicism resulting

from recent highly visible scandals (Peus et al., 2012). Theorists have suggested that authentic

leadership is a root construct for effective leadership and therefore an integral element in other

effective contemporary leadership theories (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa,

2005). Authenticity is acting aligned with one's beliefs, values, emotions and experiences

(Gardner et al., 2005). Ethicists have suggested that authentic leadership acts through promoting

higher levels of trust and consequently more leadership success (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009), since trust has been found to completely or significantly mediate the relationship between leadership behaviors and outcomes (Goodwin, Whittington, Murray, & Nichols, 2011). Peus et al. (2012) posited that the self-awareness inherent in authentic leaders acts to build such trust and the effectiveness of authenticity has found to be cross-cultural (Roof, 2013), but empirical support is still somewhat modest since the theory is relatively new (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009).

While an early stage theory, authenticity has deep roots in psychology and philosophy (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Walumbwa et al. (2008) defined authentic leadership as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (p.94). Those characteristic are demonstrated in the leader by considering broad input in decision-making, maintaining and practicing strong moral standards and values, presenting the leader's genuine self to others, and possessing clear insight into the leader's own strengths and weaknesses (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

There are a number of particularly fertile concepts for further research related to authentic leadership. Examining the interactions of authentic leadership with other leadership constructs through the use of advanced statistical systems modeling can unravel the underlying complex relationships between authentic leadership and other leadership theories (Walumbwa et al., 2008), trust (Peus et al., 2012), emotional intelligence (Gardner et al, 2005), personality, implicit leadership theories (ILT) (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009), leader-member exchange (LMX), intelligence (Antonakis, 2004), cultural factors (Alon & Higgins, 2005), and other organizational

and leadership constructs (Roof, 2013). Understanding the impact of authentic leadership on group results (Peus et al., 2012), how individual constructs within authentic leadership may impact outcomes (Peus et al., 2012; Roof, 2013), the role of trust as mediator or moderator of authentic leadership effectiveness (Goodwin et al., 2011; Peus et al., 2012), and how individual authentic characteristics interact within the emotional and social organizational networks to benefit followers (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014) will begin to unravel the fullness of authentic leadership. Recent research has suggested that opportunities for exploring the relationship between authentic leadership, and other leadership theories, trust, culture, and leader attributes are many.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) recommended researchers employ more experimental and quasi-experimental designs to better isolate causation and expand on the sparse empirical support for authentic leadership (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009). As researchers unravel those aspects of authenticity that involve self-awareness, emotions, and values, the connection between authentic leadership practices and related emotional intelligence elements, the second area proposed for further investigation, will also be advanced.

Emotional Intelligence

Research has suggested that it is important for leaders to understand emotions, theirs and others, be able to integrate emotions in decisions and actions, and to be willing to express emotions (Esu & Inyang, 2010). Management of emotions was suggested by Metcalf and Benn (2013) as a crucial contributor to the ability to lead in ever increasing complex systems (p. 381) since complexity increases anxiety, confusion, and related human emotions. Emotional intelligence, the perception, identification, and management of emotions to enhance

relationships, was widely revealed in 1990 and since has been more broadly applied in the fields

of psychology and counseling than in leadership (Killian, 2012).

Early research found that emotional intelligence contributed to leadership effectiveness,

satisfaction, and performance, but many of those studies failed to consider and control for

personality and intelligence (Antonakis, 2004; Killian, 2012). Emotional intelligence is touted by

some as an essential leadership construct, while others have argued it is insignificant when

personality and intelligence are considered (Metcalf & Benn, 2013). While emotional

management may be important, recent evidence has suggested that emotional intelligence as

currently defined lacks discriminant validity relative to personality and intelligence, rendering it

redundant (Metcalf & Benn, 2013). If emotional intelligence does contribute to effective

leadership beyond intelligence and an agreeable personality, then further study is needed to

identify what particular personality characteristics in emotional management are impactful

(Killian, 2012; Metcalf & Benn, 2013). Killian (2012) suggested that existing personality

measures such as the Big 5 are quite broad and further research may reveal particular emotional

intelligence characteristics that are distinct from current personality measures and promote

effective leadership outcomes. Antonakis (2004) however disputed the necessity of emotional

intelligence arguing that claims for the concept are "unsubstantiated, exaggerated,

misrepresented, or simply false" (p. 171). Challenging the research community to support

emotional intelligence empirically, Antonakis (2004) argued, the "endless theoretical debating

and propositions are not going to help science and practice. We have had enough propositions

and armchair speculation regarding the utility of EI. Now we want to see the data." (p.179).

Additional research must be sound theoretically and rigorous so intelligence, personality, and

other existing constructs are controlled for and emotional intelligence properly investigated.

Closely related to emotional intelligence, Alon and Higgins (2005) posit that cultural intelligence positively correlates with effective leadership in the global community. Understanding cultural practices, especially emotional practices, offers the potential to contribute to leadership effectiveness more globally (Antonakis, 2004), and therefore, future emotional intelligence studies should incorporate cultural measures to assess cultural intelligence (Alon & Higgins, 2005).

Resolving the dispute over the role that emotion intelligence may serve as a unique antecedent to effective leadership, and reconciling the current gap between the widespread support for emotional intelligence in the practitioner community, and intense disputes in the research community (Antonakis, 2004) is an important responsibility for researchers as we work to advance scientific leadership theory related to emotional management.

Conclusion

Recent calls to better integrate theories, antecedents, social systems, followers, emotions and environments have been reflected in more research designs that consider multiple constructs (Dinh, et al., 2014). In addition, more robust, systems oriented statistical methods have been used to support the more complex analyses and they hold promise to reveal nuances of the multifaceted influences to effective leadership (Dinh, et al., 2014). Such broad integration, classification, and ongoing definitional work offers great potential for understanding the complexity, breadth, emergence, and fundamental traits (Dinh, et al., 2014; Esu & Inyang, 2010) that influence leaders and leadership. In particular, based on a review of current research interests and related theoretical interdependencies, authentic leadership and emotional intelligence have both been posited to be root constructs to effective leadership and therefore warrant further inquiry.

In addition to exploring promising fundamental theories and constructs, research methodologies should be chosen that can better isolate causation. As researchers seek to further define why leaders succeed and why they fail (Esu & Inyang, 2010), more experimental, quasi-experimental, and longitudinal studies are needed to isolate cause and effect more empirically rather than only theoretically. The leadership environment is becoming more complex driven by globalization, multi-culturalism, generational changes, and shifting values. Research that investigates fundamental constructs and how they influence success can offer practitioners real-world solutions for leadership selection and development, while providing the foundation for the theoretical advances leadership researchers seek. Authentic leadership and emotional intelligence both offer significant opportunities because they are in early stage, exhibit high levels of interaction with other leadership constructs, and exhibit early indications that they may be root constructs to leadership. Among the many potential areas of inquiry to leadership researchers, authentic leadership and emotional intelligence offer great promise of revealing meaningful insights.

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