Leadership revisited

Towards an integrative understanding of leadership

Ivan Doulgerof, Cand.psych., Aut.
Stationsvej 10, 3480 Fredensborg, Denmark
(ivan@inactis.dk)
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5408-9210

Abstract

Most people have an intuitive understanding of what leadership is. However, leadership is not an easy phenomenon to define, and no universally accepted definition exists. The present paper calls for the integration of person-oriented constructs and contextual variables which can help define a new frame of understanding of the phenomenon of leadership. The point of departure for such an integration entails an understanding of competence and essential perspectives on leadership, as well as the recognition that differences in leadership contexts call for different forms of leadership. The phenomenon of leadership should be understood as both an intra-psychic and inter-active process, where the leader exerts situational behaviours and interacts with followers to solve tasks embedded in the concrete leadership context. Thus, definitions of leadership and effective leadership must be made at the micro-level of the individual leader.

Key words: Leadership, competence, leadership contexts

Introduction

Personality can be understood as the totality of interrelated clusters of dependent and independent intrapsychic variables, which together modulate the individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviour in
given contexts or “interrelated conditions in which something exists or occur” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1993). Yet, there exists no universally accepted definition of personality. By the same token, leadership is also an elusive phenomenon, and there is conceptual disagreement about what the phenomenon is and how it should be understood: “Students of leadership – academics and practitioners alike – have no doubt discovered three things: (1) the number of integrated models, theories, prescriptions, and conceptual schemes of leadership is mind-boggling; (2) much of leadership literature is fragmentary, trivial, unrealistic, or dull; and (3) the research results are characterized by Type III errors (solving the wrong problems precisely) and by contradictions” (McCall and Lombardo, 1978).

There is a remarkable interest in understanding the phenomenon of leadership. If the phenomenon can be understood and defined, effective leadership can be determined. Once effective leadership can be determined, qualified assessment and development can commence. The challenge is, though, that there exists no universally accepted definition of the phenomenon of leadership.

This paper offers a frame for an integrative conceptualisation of leadership and highlights important points of attention which can adjust existing approaches to the study, assessment and development of leadership.

**Leadership – Problematic approaches**

Early research in leadership was primarily focused on the search for unique personal characteristics of leaders, which unambiguously distinguished leaders from followers. The challenge, though, was that it was difficult to determine a direct correlation between personality and leadership. In fact, the relationship between the two phenomena was unclear and often jarring (Stogdill, 1948 and Mann, 1959).
Obviously, a fundamental problem was related to the lack of universally accepted definitions of personality and leadership. Even research findings with regard to the connection between personality traits – or relatively stable dispositions to act in certain ways in certain situations – and leadership were also weak (Heslin, 1964).

A need arose to focus on situational factors when researchers sought to understand the correlation between the innate personal characteristics of leaders and the performance of work units. The shift in focus caused leadership researchers to become interested in what leaders did, and how they behaved towards followers. The attention thus shifted from innate qualities in the leader towards leadership behaviours. Although researchers operated with dozens of different ways of categorising leadership behaviours (Bass, 1990), most researchers oriented themselves toward four overarching behavioural styles: person and task-oriented leadership behaviours, and participative and directive leadership behaviours. Here too, challenges quickly arose. Some leaders turned out to be very directing in certain situations and very participatory in other situations. Some leaders turned out to be focused on results and overall goal achievement, while also engaging in various forms of care-taking behaviours towards followers. The problem was that theorists in leadership styles fell into the same trap as trait theorists had done. Leadership style theorists simply assumed that it was indeed possible to identify particular leadership behaviours or sets of leadership styles which, without a doubt, could be associated with effective leadership – regardless of the situations in which the behaviours or leadership styles were performed.

From the 1960s until the mid-1970s, theorists began to focus on ways in which situations could be incorporated into their theories. The problem was that situational style theories of leadership turned out to have their limitations – i.e., concerning complexity, specificity, culture, and weak results in validation studies (Vecchio, 1987; Blank et al, 1990).
Newer situational style theories of leadership encompassed a relatively large number of situational variables but had a tendency to describe leadership styles in terms of very few dimensions – e.g. from autocratic to participative leadership (Vroom and Jargo, 1973 and 1988). Naturally, the use of very few dimensions such as autocratic and participative leadership styles could only provide fragmentary explanations of leadership – simply because there were many other ways in which leaders’ behaviours could vary and influence effectiveness in work units. Although situational leadership theories could indeed help leaders to become more aware of the factors involved in given leadership situations, they did not, in themselves and in detail, describe how to perform different leadership styles. Furthermore, they did not provide descriptions of how to perform different leadership styles well.

While research into existing theories continued to be carried out from the mid-1970s, growing disappointment with situational style theories reactivated the interest in the study of personality characteristics associated with effective leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990 and 1994; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1989; Lord et al, 1986 and 1993; Schriesheim & Kerr, 1977; Shamir et al, 1993; Stogdill, 1974; Yukl. 1994; Zaccaro et al, 1991). This also included what could be conceptualised as alternative approaches to leadership behaviour and the study thereof – i.e., leader-member exchange models of Leadership (Graen and Cashman, 1975), attribution processes and leadership behaviours (Green and Mitchel, 1979), and interpersonal skills models of leadership (Wright and Taylor, 1994). A common theme in alternative approaches to leadership behaviour was skills – which have conceptual, technical and interpersonal dimensions and which can be understood as learned forms of simple or advanced behaviour; not only in terms of specific leadership behaviours, but also in relation to how leaders accurately assessed and interpreted given work-related situations.

Today, there exist many leadership theories that try to explain what leadership is, as well as how and why certain individuals become leaders. Some leadership theories are primarily behaviourally oriented, some focus on how leaders make use of power and influence, some focus on leaders’
interactions with and involvement of followers, some are focused on the context of leaders, and some are focused on organisation and group performance. However, a universally accepted definition of leadership still does not exist. And since theorists and researchers have a keen focus on specific facets of leadership, it is doubtful if a catch-all and universally accepted definition of the phenomenon will emerge on the horizon within the near future. Therefore, it is time to carve out another path towards an integrative understanding of the phenomenon of leadership.

The leadership context
To oversimplify matters, and if we try to define the phenomenon of swimming, it becomes clear why it is difficult to define leadership as a universal construct. Intuitively, most people in the World understand what swimming is. Swimming entails water and physical movement. But is there a difference between swimming to win the 100-meter Olympic final and rescuing someone from drowning? Between tactical surface swimming in military contexts and leisure time swimming in a pool? Between swimming in a river with a strong current or in freezing water? The answers are affirmative, and it is evident that the context must be taken into account before we try to determine what swimming is and consists of – let alone: when we try to determine what effective swimming is.

Most leadership activities take place within organisations. Apart from being frames for and of behaviour, and in terms of leadership, organisations can be understood as contextual representations in which the phenomenon of leadership is exerted. Organisations are complex social systems where activities at the individual level, the social level and the organisational level respectively influence each other reciprocally. What occurs on one level will inevitably influence and be influenced by the other levels – as well as by the surrounding environment.

Mcgregor operates with four main variables which are involved in leadership (1960):
- The leader him- or herself – his or her personality traits, attitudes, skills and qualities, etc.
- The followers – their personality traits, attitudes, skills and qualities, etc.
- The organisation – Its characteristics, type, purpose, internal structures and processes, etc.
- The social, economic and political milieu.

There are, though, other important variables which are involved in leadership, and which vary from organisation to organisations – e.g.:

- Contextual and situational variables in the form of technology, equipment, engines and machines, atmosphere, time frames, coincidences, risks, varying degrees of unpredictability and uncertainty, etc.
- More or less ever-changing environments with shifting conditions, and for most: increased competition, constant demands for efficiency and profitability, as well as a constant challenge to adjust organisational structures and processes in accordance with changes in the environment.
- Cultural aspects – both national and organisational.
- Legislation, which may have both national and international dimensions.

It can therefore be said that individual leadership contexts contain several variables, which impact each other reciprocally, and which are distinct for any given organisation.

Adding to the intricacy of leadership contexts, many organisations function differently under extreme conditions than under normal conditions. For instance, maritime leaders not only have to navigate in a cross-pressure between the condition of the vessel and its crew, ever-changing crews with varying levels of qualifications and different cultural backgrounds, demands from land-based organisations, the sea, and the weather. Maritime leaders are also equipped with special authority and means of formal power and must be able to lead under extreme conditions where lives are at risk.
In typical Tayloristic organisations (Taylor, 1967) that exist in relatively stable environments, low levels of technical complexity and in-clarity makes it possible for leaders to lead in accordance with the principle of one-to-one mapping and allows them to be the focal point for the distribution of work. However, in environments with rapidly changing demands and conditions, there may be a need for other forms of organising and organisation, where followers are set free to utilise their qualifications to handle changing demands. Some work conditions thus also lead to high levels of technical interdependence, which refer to the need for employees to interact and cooperate when solving tasks (Ulich et al, 1996). In some organisations, there may thus be a strong need for employees to engage in decision-making processes during work, which again increases the demand for information processing in and between employees. In such organisations, changing demands and conditions, high levels of technical complexity and in-clarity simply necessitate interaction and employee influence – and in some cases: autonomy in groups of employees. This not only changes the leadership context – in turn, it changes the role and function of leadership.

Just like swimming, leadership is exerted in given contexts. Differences in leadership contexts simply call for different forms of leadership. Cognitively, emotionally, as well as behaviourally. Because although there may be similarities when it comes to activities and processes, there is a tremendous difference in between, for example, leadership in an operational-military context entailing warfighting and leadership in a kindergarten context.

The above-mentioned clearly illustrates that a one-size-fits-all definition of leadership is inadequate. And it is clear, that it is not possible to conceptualise leadership strictly from a singular perspective.

**Competence and leadership**

Leadership must be understood as a contextual phenomenon that entails a range of psychological mechanisms within the leader who exerts given behaviours in given leadership contexts, and a detour
into the phenomenon of competence and a number of other psychological constructs will be introduced in this section, as they can highlight important points of attention with regard to the phenomenon of leadership.

R. W. White is the first to use the term competence as a scientific construct (1959). Instead of focusing on ego processes and adaptive mechanisms in the individual with regard to dealing with the environment, White is interested in behaviours that entail "effective interaction with the environment" (1959, p. 317), and he defines competence as "[...] an organism’s capacity to interact effectively with its environment" (1959, p. 297). Stating that "[...] mental capacities such as memory and ideational thinking, become [...] high-level methods of dealing with the environment" (1959, pp. 316-317), White points towards how cognition and the ability to create meaning – in the sense of the process by which situations are interpreted in light of existing knowledge and experience – in given contexts are important prerequisites for the unfolding of competence. Naturally, it must be presumed that the unfolding of competence must be regulated by the individual for it to be able to interact efficiently with the environment. However, in response to what is happening in the environment, the response of the individual must not only be adapted to the variables in the environment, but rather "dealing with the environment means carrying on a continuing transaction which gradually changes [the individual’s] relation to the environment" (1959, p. 322). In this manner, White points out that action or behaviour is the very expression of competence – and that it is a continuous intra-psychic and behavioural process, as competence requires "focal attention" (ibid.) and entails the "focalizing of action upon this object" (ibid.). Hereby, dealing with the environment becomes "directing focal attention to some part of it and organizing actions to have some effect on this part" (ibid.).

The above-mentioned serves as an important stepping stone towards understanding what leadership is.
Contexts in which the leader is to unfold competence, must contain elements that necessitate that the leader must turn his or her attention towards contextual variables. These contextual variables must be of such a nature that the leader must engage in behaviours that are exploratory, and are prompted as a result of attempting to deal with the context. Something, then, speaks in favour of the existence of unique elements in these situations which distinguish them from routine situations. If the characteristics of the contexts contain anything other than that which can be dealt with through routine actions and knowledge-based approaches, it must necessarily be that the context:

- Is constituted in such a manner, that it does not immediately make sense to the leader.
- Is characterized by – seemingly – lack of immediate possibilities to act.
- Appear to have a low degree of predictability – and is perhaps even entail “limited time, uncertainty, high stakes, vague goals, and unstable conditions” (Klein, 2008, p. 456).
- Contains variables which must be dealt with.

In an attempt to understand leadership, and as already mentioned, it only makes sense to understand the phenomenon when it is exerted in specific contexts. But already now it becomes clear that it is also necessary to understand what is happening in the leader when he or she has to manage him- or herself in the given context. And as we now operate with the existence of what could be coined competence-unfolding contexts that are characterized by lack of meaning, unpredictability and an immediate inability to act, the consequence must be that the leader is affected by his or her leadership context to a lesser or higher degree. Without venturing into stress, it thus follows that the leader must be able to cope with his or her reactions towards what is taking place in the specific context. The unfolding of competence by the leader thus requires self-regulation. In other words, a domain-specific regulatory mechanism must exist in the leader that influences confidence in his or her abilities through the perception of his or her efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Meichenbaum & Asarnov, 1979). And this mechanism must partly mediate the integration of cognitive, social and behavioural capacities into
action – and influence the degree of persistence in relation to the leadership behaviour which is to be exerted in the specific context. Therefore, for the leader to be able to deal with the context effectively, he or she must be able to manage him- or herself. If the leader fails to manage him- or herself, the leader will never be able to act appropriately – let alone interact with the surroundings effectively.

Something is at play in the leader. And something is at play between the leader and the context.

To reach the point where it is possible to unfold competence, the leader must seek to create meaning in the context wherein he or she must act competently. This is done through the use of knowledge, skills and thinking.

Thinking can be defined as an organised intellectual process, through which the individual makes use of knowledge (Gilhooly, 1995). To be able to reach the point where the leader engages in adequate activities and acts efficiently in the leadership context, knowledge must necessarily be domain specific – meaning: applicable in the context where the knowledge is to be used. Thus, there must be a cognitive process in play, through which the involvement of thinking and knowledge leads to coherent organising of the leadership context by the leader. When a given leadership context appears without making immediate sense to the leader, has a low degree of predictability, and contains variables that need to be acted upon, it can be said to be characterised by complexity (Elstrup, 1998). Per se, coherent organising of the leadership context is carried out through the reduction of contextual complexity into meaningful and manageable elements (Elstrup, 1998; Pitt & Clarke, 1999). However, when contextual information flow exceeds the possibility to create meaning, the leader must not only be able to structure and re-structure existing ideas but must be able to generate new ideas. In this manner, and seen from a cognitive psychological perspective, the phenomenon of competence can be viewed as an ability which serves the purpose of creating meaning in complexity. This ability entails
structuring and restructuring existing ideas, but also generation of new ideas when the flow of information exceeds the individual's ability to immediately create meaning.

Complexity will inevitably, to a lesser or larger extent and as previously indicated, affect the leader in the sense that he or she must be able to cope with his or her reactions, create meaning in the surroundings and orchestrate adequate levels of knowledge and skills before we can say that the leader unfolds competence.

The cognitive subcomponents of leadership – coping, utilisation of knowledge and skills, as well as sensemaking – constitute a flexible system, in which a continuous sequentiality does not seem possible as the interaction between the subcomponents is defined by the very leadership context in which the leader finds him- or herself. We must thus understand the cognitive foundation of leadership as an interaction between different subcomponent processes within the leader, which are textualized in the couplings between the subcomponents in relation to specific leadership contexts. This can be expressed as a synthetic ability in the leader who aims to make sense of complexity to reach a state that can enable him or her to deal with contextual complexity.

Furthermore, leadership must be understood as a social activity, which takes place in the here-and-now and which involves followers. Thus, leadership can not just be a personal, subjective phenomenon. It is also relationally conditioned. Borrowing from Lave and Wenger (1991), leadership must hence also be understood as the elicitation of situational behaviours through participation in social praxis – in the sense of a concrete relational aspect of contexts, which consists of different forms of social interaction in the framework of social structures – through the mobilisation and use of knowledge and skills for the effective solving of socially defined tasks. Seen from this praxis leadership perspective, the unfolding of competence can indeed be viewed as the leaders’ situated and relational behaviour in social praxis, through which he or she mobilises and utilises relevant
knowledge and skills. And this is in order to effectively solve socially defined tasks. In contrast to the cognitive psychology perspective, action and participation – where the latter can be understood as the individual's contribution to and interaction with relational others in meaningful forms of interaction – should be understood as aspects that must be included in the understanding of the phenomenon of leadership.

In light of the above stated, leadership should not just be understood as a specific characteristic in the leader. Rather, from a competence perspective, leadership should be understood as both an intra-psychic and inter-active process; Intra-psychic because of the interaction between cognitive components and personality variables taking place in the leader; inter-active because the leader necessarily must interact with his or her context to be able to deal with the self-same context. In this way, an understanding of the phenomenon of leadership requires an understanding of both the cognitive psychology perspective, as well as the praxis leadership perspective. The one becomes a prerequisite for the other in the sense that processes take place in the leader who must act contextually. Naturally, the relative importance or weighting of the intra-psychic and inter-active processes necessary for the leader to be able to deal with the leadership context effectively, varies from leadership context to leadership context.

**Integration**

Most people have an intuitive understanding of what leadership is. However, even in our common sense understanding of leadership, it becomes clear that the phenomenon entails imprecise categories of varying behaviours, skills and personality constructs.

In an attempt to define leadership, we can choose to view leadership as a phenomenon which can be understood in terms of social contexts and interaction with others. Seen through this ocular we can seek to highlight visible and social aspects of the leader or how the leader appears to and impacts
others. Social aspects and activities, for example, include communication and communication styles, how the leader executes and solves tasks through others, how the leader influences and guides others, and how he or she controls and regulates social processes.

However, leadership also entail something that is not visible to others. For example in terms of personality, thinking and experience. Therefore, leadership must also be conceptualised in relation to qualities or characteristics in the leader – i.e. everything about the leader in terms of physical, emotional and cognitive characteristics, as well as a wide range of intrapsychic variables which play a role in modulating the thoughts, emotions and behaviour of the leader.

A change of perspectives can make it possible to create new frames of understanding; new frames of understanding can make it possible to create new meaning; new meaning can function as a foundation for new possibilities of action (Andersen, 1994). It is only through a combination of perspectives on the phenomenon of leadership that we can begin to understand leadership as a contextual phenomenon that entails a range of psychological mechanisms within the leader who exerts given behaviours.

Attempts towards creating a one-size-fits-all definition of leadership have historically been disheartening. The problem lies in the endeavour to integrate most subjects taught from most subdisciplines of psychology and related academic disciplines into one singular and overarching framework for the understanding of leadership. And evidently, any attempt to examine all possible factors influencing social interaction and the behaviours of leaders at a generic level would be an impossible task – even if the plethora of generic factors continuously interacting and impacting on one another reciprocally in given leadership situations were ignored.

At the theoretical level, effective leadership can be defined as that which ensures effective dealing with the context – where effective can be conceptualised as specifically orchestrated behaviours
aimed at meeting specific contextual needs. And hereby an understanding of leadership is only possible when one for example does away with the idea that leadership should only entail some particular sets of behaviours. Concurrently, the term effective carries with it the meaning that leadership must necessarily be seen as both focused on results and focused on relations, as it is unfolded through the leader's interaction with the context – and because the result depends on the very same interaction. Again: leadership is necessarily context-dependent. Leadership in one context is not necessarily effective in another. Leadership must be understood in relation to specific tasks to be solved in specific leadership contexts.

Taken together, leadership can be understood to be consisting of various psychological layers. And within this frame of understanding, leadership can be viewed as an organised phenomenon with goal-oriented, relational-oriented and context-dependent characteristics. Since the phenomenon of leadership consists of several components and aspects, it can be said that it is multifaceted. Furthermore, leadership can also be viewed as a synthetic process in that it combines several elements into a whole.

Leadership can not be viewed as something specific but must be understood as a generating phenomenon consisting of a multitude of inextricably interlinked psychological and contextual variables. The question is, therefore, whether it makes sense to attempt to create a catch-all definition of leadership, which will probably never reach universal acceptance – or whether it makes more sense to operate with a working template for a definition of leadership.

Since the very phenomenon of leadership is unfolded situated and contextually, a working template is suitable to serve as a starting point for the creation of definitions of leadership at the micro level of the individual leader. Based on the content of this paper, a working template for a definition of leadership could be formulated as:
A multifaceted synthetic process, where the leader, through the usage of adequate qualifications, manages him- or herself, creates meaning in complexity, unfolds situational behaviours and interacts with followers to effectively solve socially defined tasks which are embedded in the leadership context.

Closing comments

Much literature on leadership and leadership theories tells us quite a lot about leadership at the generic level, just as it raises our consciousness about the phenomenon. But for the most part, there is very little literature which describes precisely how to lead.

In a very practical sense, the aim of leadership theories and research must be to help leaders to be as effective as possible. Points of attention and approaches stemming from leadership theories and research must not be reduced to superficial prescriptions. Instead, they must mirror the very real complexities of the particular situations that particular leaders face in their particular leadership contexts, whilst also providing applicable methods of improving leadership performance. This means helping leaders understand their specific leadership contexts, as well as identifying what particular skills should be developed, and which particular capacities should be enhanced for them to function as optimally as possible in their particular leadership contexts. Simple and generalised prescriptions that ignore the complexity of leadership exerted in particular leadership contexts will be irrelevant and potentially even counterproductive.

If we ask ourselves the question ‘what is a forest’, we quickly realise that there is no point in trying to answer it with statements about either flora or fauna. To elucidate what a forest is, we must both conceptualise and understand fauna and flora. The same principle applies to the phenomenon of
leadership, in that one can fall into the trap of 'not being able to see the forest for all the trees'. The point here is that by focusing on selected, yet overarching, components of leadership, there is a danger of losing insight into the individual leader's orchestration of actions that can ensure effective handling of his or her leadership context.

This paper aimed to offer a frame for a novel conceptualisation of leadership and to highlight important points of attention which can perhaps adjust existing approaches to the study, assessment and development of the phenomenon. Overall, and in order to take into account the complexity of leadership at the micro level, attention should be paid towards:

- Development of fine-grained methods for categorising leadership contexts and leadership situations.
- Identification of specific conditions and contextual demands that the individual leader can be expected to face in his or her specific leadership contexts.
- Identification of specific skills and knowledge requirements, as well as required abilities of the individual leader needed to engage in successful coping and sensemaking activities when leading others in specific leadership contexts.

The assessment and development of leadership should be based on these specific findings. This also means that when studying leadership behaviours, power and influence, the interaction of leaders and their involvement of followers, organisation and group performance, etc., researchers must recognise that these elements can not be treated as generic variables detached from reality. To have true value to leaders and practitioners of leadership, such elements must be studied in light of specific leadership contexts in which they are exerted and enacted.
“Definitions are the guardians of rationality, the first line of defence against the chaos of mental disintegration” (Ayn Rand, 1975, p. 77). Concerning the phenomenon of leadership, we need working templates which can help us create meaningful working definitions of leadership that are rational – and which can help leaders solve the right problems precisely, and enable them to effectively deal with their particular leadership contexts.

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