
Does Effective Organizational Leadership Require Loyal Followers?

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What have we learned after 7,500+ studies on organizational leadership? Is effective leadership a matter of style, inherent attributes, a specific set of behaviors, or the situation at hand? What is the role of followers in the leadership equation? This paper explores some answers to these questions, based on the work of organizational researchers and practitioners. It also explores the tenets of transformational leadership, one approach that has proven effective in a variety of organizations, and has received broad based support.

The following diagram presents an overview of research on leadership.¹ Researchers have generally fallen into a number of “schools of thought” as they have searched for an explanation for leadership effectiveness. These various perspectives range from the individual leader to the organizational situation as the cause of effective leadership. Let us briefly explore the findings from each category of leadership research along this continuum, as shown in Figure 1.

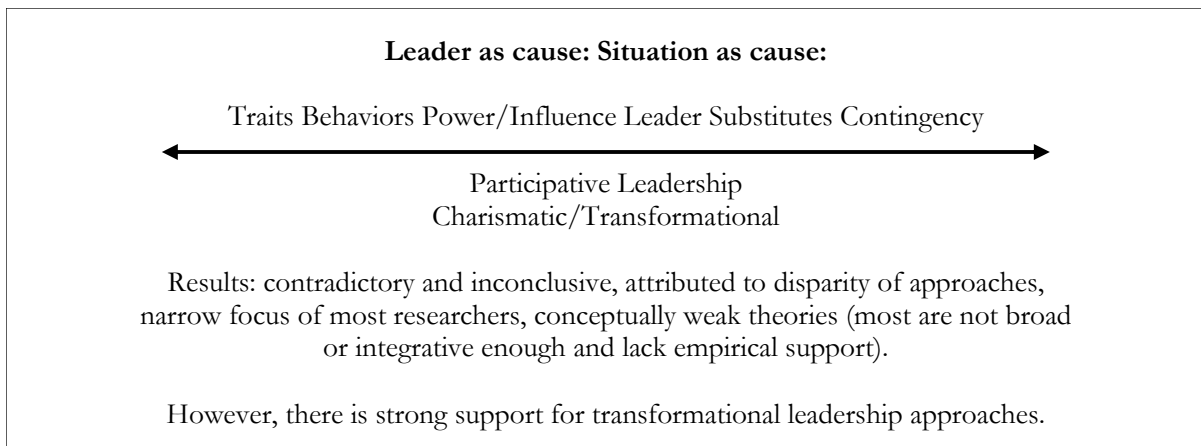


Fig. 1: Leadership Research Overview (after 7500 studies).

Findings from research about inherent leader traits and skills:

The early research examined whether leaders were born rather than made. It focused on a leader’s personality, motives, values and skills, arguing that leadership success was the result of extraordinary traits (this premise has not been supported). More recent research has identified that leaders exhibit a combination of technical, conceptual and interpersonal skills. Examples of conceptual skills of leaders include formulating vision and strategy, and understanding organizational culture. Examples of interpersonal skills include a high regard for people, listening skills, and an appreciation for individual and cultural differences.

Findings from research focusing on leader behavior:

This research looked at what leaders actually do, how they spend their time, and the relationship of behavior to leadership effectiveness. It has produced many useful insights about leadership actions that can improve the performance of a group or an organization. Effective leaders develop a mental agenda of short-term objectives and long-term strategies that they use to guide their actions, manage their time, and become more productive. They focus on behaviors that support both task and relationship, rather than one over the other.

Findings from research about the power and influence of leaders:

This stream of research looked at the amount and type of power and influence that leaders have, and how they utilize it. Researchers discovered that followers play an important role in determining leader power and influence, and the amount of power that a leader needs often depends on the situation. For example, more influence is needed to make major changes in strategy when there is strong resistance to change from followers. On the other hand, less influence is needed when people have shared goals and objectives and are intrinsically motivated to achieve them. How leaders use power determines whether it results in commitment, compliance, or resistance from followers.

Findings from research on leader substitutes and the situation:

This research argued that characteristics of subordinates or followers, the task at hand, and the organization (contextual factors) explain some components of leadership effectiveness. Aspects of the situation—for example, the nature of the work, whether repetitive and predictable, or variable and uncertain—do determine the importance of leadership (more leadership is needed where the work is uncertain and variable). Organizational policies, rules, budgetary limitations, labor laws, and other internal and external constraints can limit leader decisions and actions. Similarly, leadership is directly affected by the knowledge, skills, and abilities of followers: the adage that a leader is only as good as his/her team is true. Effective leaders seek to understand these situational constraints and opportunities and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Findings from research on participative leadership:

In participative leadership, followers are involved in sharing the leadership role, particularly through participation in organizational decision-making. Researchers often compare the benefits of different levels of involvement, ranging from situations where leaders make autocratic decisions (without follower input) to total delegation of this function to followers. In between these two extremes there are various levels of consultation

and joint decision making. Research suggests that the benefits of participative leadership are dependent on a number of factors such as the importance of the decision, how willing people are to trust that the process is legitimate (and not lip service), and how important follower buy-in is for implementation of the decision. Participative decision making is also dependent upon the competence of followers to diagnose a problem, generate feasible solutions and evaluate them, and plan for implementation.

Findings from research on charismatic and transformational leadership:

Beginning in the 1980s, researchers sought a more integrative approach to understanding leadership. These leadership approaches included leader traits, behavior, power, and situational variables, and began to provide more complete explanations for leadership effectiveness. While researchers have documented examples of both charismatic and transformational leaders who have been effective—and some researchers use the terms interchangeably—there are some important distinctions. Most notably, in charismatic leadership, the focus is on the individual leader, who can be good or bad (some researchers have studied the dark side of charisma), whereas in transformational leadership the focus is on the collective, and the leader's role in building commitment for organizational mission, objectives, and strategies. Charismatic leaders are often not transformational.

Why are the general research results contradictory and inconclusive, after so many studies?

Much of the leadership research during the twentieth century has been very narrow in approach, resulting in theories that have conceptual weaknesses or are contradictory and inconclusive. Given the inherent complexity of this topic, the large volume of leadership research has not been broad enough to integrate the findings about leader traits, behaviors, relationship with followers, or the contextual influences of the organizational situation at hand. There has also been a strong bias toward attributing organizational effectiveness to the actions of single, heroic leaders rather than recognizing the role of shared leadership processes. However, recent leadership

researchers are proposing integrative conceptual frameworks and models for understanding the complexity of leadership, within the social systems of the organizations in which leadership occurs (Yukl, 2006). This is an encouraging trend.

A Deeper Look at Transformational Leadership

Since the research on transformational leadership has shown that it is effective in a variety of organizations and situations, it is worth taking a deeper, albeit brief, look at this leadership approach.

Rather than offering rewards, such as salaries or authority, to get performance from followers, transformational leaders appeal to followers' higher values to build commitment to an inspirational purpose for the organization. They empower others to share the leadership role, and develop leaders at all levels of the organization. As followers' enthusiasm and motivation grows, they transform themselves and the organization. The actions of transformational leaders are more "serving and supporting" than "commanding and controlling." This leadership approach takes integrity and the courage to do what is right for the organization, regardless of personal ambition, and true transformational leaders are rare. The bottom line is that transformational leadership engenders trust and respect for leaders from their followers.

Kouzes and Posner present one of my favorite expressions of the transformational leadership approach in their 1995 book *The Leadership Challenge*.² These researchers surveyed over 60,000 leaders at all levels of a wide variety of public and private organizations, and

discovered a recurring set of five leadership practices and behaviors, with ten commitments that these practices embody. The essence of their leadership approach is summarized in Figure 2.

Inherent Paradoxes and Competing Values in Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness

Effective leadership is a complex construct. It is dependent on both political/organizational actions and people-oriented actions, and on both leaders and followers. Leadership and organizational effectiveness are also inherently paradoxical, with competing values. During this session we briefly reviewed a Competing Values Approach to organizational leadership, based on a 2007 book by Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, McGrath, and St. Clair, entitled *Becoming A Master Manager: A Competing Values Approach*.³ This approach presents four contrasting models of organizational effectiveness, and a leadership competency framework comprised of eight leadership roles, with the underlying premise that the complex nature of organizational life requires mastery and balance of multiple leadership competencies.

Leading Organizational Change

This session briefly touched on the role of leaders and followers during organizational change.⁴ To change the visible elements of organizations—for example, behavior, style, writing, or language—leaders must change the invisible elements, including values, assumptions, vision, and operating paradigms. Leaders must also understand that the quality of stakeholders' participation in organizational change and transformation processes affects the outcome.

PRACTICES	COMMITMENTS
MODEL THE WAY	Find your voice (clarifying personal values) Set the example (aligning actions/values)
INSPIRE A SHARED VISION	Envision the future Enlist others in common vision
CHALLENGE THE PROCESS	Search for opportunities, innovation Experiment and take risks (learn)
ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT	Foster collaboration and trust Strengthen others, sharing power
ENCOURAGE THE HEART	Recognize individual contributions Celebrate the values and victories

Fig. 2: Kouzes and Posner (1995), *The Leadership Challenge*

Simply put, meaningful participation helps people understand the reasons for change, builds buy-in, and changes attitudes and behaviors. Leaders can build external support for change through sharing authority and giving the community a voice in organizational planning. People in organizations resist change because of deeply held beliefs and assumptions—for example, lack of trust in leaders or belief that change is unnecessary or not feasible. They may also resist change from fear of losing control, power, competency, resources, or status. There is no question that changing organizational culture requires loyal followers.

The Essence of Effective Leadership

After studying the vast majority of leadership research (a truly remarkable feat in itself), Yukl (2006) presented a summary of the ten most important leadership functions for enhancing collective work in teams and in organizations. Given the focus of this session on the question of whether effective leadership requires loyal followers, I have organized Yukl's ten leadership functions into two categories: those functions focused on TASK, and those functions focused on PEOPLE.

Leadership functions focused on TASK:

- Create alignment on objectives and strategies
- Organize and coordinate activities
- Obtain necessary resources and support

Leadership functions focused on PEOPLE:

- Help interpret the meaning of events

- Build task commitment and optimism
- Build mutual trust and cooperation
- Strengthen collective identity
- Encourage and facilitate collective learning
- Develop and empower people
- Promote social justice and morality

Given the fact that 90 percent of problems in organizations are people problems, it is not surprising that seven out of ten of the important leadership functions identified by Yukl focus on people. It also underscores the important role of followers in leadership effectiveness.

Summary and Another Look at the Initial Question

This paper has summarized some of the findings from decades of research (and many thousands of studies) on leadership effectiveness, in an attempt to explore the question of whether organizational leadership requires loyal followers. While multiple criteria are necessary to explain the inherent complexities of organizational life, one can say with certainty that leadership effectiveness is often evaluated in terms of the consequences for followers. In other words, loyal followers are a very strong component of effective leadership. In particular, the research literature on transformational leadership and leading organizational change supports this premise.

Notes

1. This diagram, and the summaries of leadership research findings in this article were based on doctoral coursework with Dr. Gary Yukl, University at Albany, SUNY. For more comprehensive descriptions of leadership research, see Yukl's exemplary textbook, *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., Prentice Hall, 2006).

2. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

3. Robert E. Quinn, Sue R. Faerman, Michael P. Thompson, Michael R. McGrath and Lynda S. St. Clair, *Becoming a Master Manager: A Competing Values Approach*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007).

4. For more information, see Candace Tangorra Matelic, "Understanding Change and Transformation in History Organizations," *History News*, 63, 2, (Spring 2008): 7-13.