A Communicative Theory of Leadership Practice

Kathryn Gaines

Traditional leadership research often examines traits (e.g., Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Mumford et al., 2000; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004), roles (e.g., Graen and Cashman, 1975; Graen, 1976), as well as competencies and styles (e.g., Bennis & Nanus, 1985, Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Kouzes & Posner, 1995) possessed by individuals – usually those in formal positions of authority. This approach has enlarged our understanding of individual leaders and psychological or contextual variables that contribute to leadership, but it has not significantly advanced our knowledge of how leadership, as a complex social process, is practiced or developed.

Paradigmatic shifts in leadership research beginning in the early 21st century have directed us toward the study of leadership as practice (e.g., Carroll, Levy, Richmond, 2008; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012) and leadership as a collective, relational, or systemic process (e.g., Day, Gronn, Salas, 2006; Drath, 2001; Drath et al., 2008; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Marion, Uhl-Bien, & McKelvey, 2007; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Raelin, 2003; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). My research extends these approaches through a communicative theory of leadership practice that positions leadership as an interactive process generated symbolically by multiple performers moving in and out of leader and follower roles (see Gaines, 2007).

Philosophical Analysis: What Makes ‘Leadership’ Leadership?

This work is based on the leadership literature, grounded in the theory of communication, and premised on an analysis (King, 1998) of leadership according to the linguistic usage of the term ‘leadership’ by scholars in the leadership field. The most frequent consistency among uses of leadership is the notion of either convincing, enabling, or creating a capacity for others to act in pursuit of group goals or interests (e.g., Burns, 1978; Gardner, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Rost, 1991). The inconsistencies among uses of the term leadership occur in terms of the who, how, where, and why. The ‘what’ of leadership is usually some form of influence or communicative activity that mobilizes
action. However, there must be something more about ‘leadership-ness’ than influence, otherwise we would not have a special name for the phenomenon, and we would call it influence. So we are left with the question, among others, what makes ‘leadership’ leadership?

Upon analysis of the concept of leadership, as used by scholars and researchers in the field, the distinguishing properties that emerge are leadership as a symbolic practice in a social context that facilitates meeting the needs or interests of the people in that social context (see Gaines, 2007). The essential elements of this understanding, based on an analysis of conceptualizations in the leadership literature, are the following: (1) Leadership is a social process. We engage in the process via actions performed intentionally with and among other people in a social system. Consequently, political, cultural, psychological, and power dynamics will be significant features of the context in which leadership is enacted. (2) The mechanism for engaging in this process is language and symbolic behavior. (3) The purpose for this process is to secure action in service of the overall interests claimed by or for the team, organization, group, or community. The distinguishing characteristic of leadership is this attempt to secure action in service of interests claimed by or for a community.

**Functions and Communicative Practices of Leadership**

This analysis, based on the linguistic properties of the term leadership and the informed linguistic intuitions about leadership revealed by scholars in the field through their research, serves as a heuristic for the development of an integrated theory of leadership practice. Based on this analysis, leadership practice ought to be explicable through a limited set of communicative practices. As a step toward identification of such practices, I conducted an investigation of leadership functions recognized in the leadership literature from the early 20th century to the present (more than one hundred books and articles were analyzed, cf. Gaines, 2007). From this investigation, it was possible to abstract four functions of leadership (see Table 1).

- Facilitate learning, understanding, and insight
- Build commitment and obligation
- Inspire and motivate
• Create or change social reality

These are the broad functional categories that serve to fulfill the process of leadership. My primary interest was then to discover how we fulfill those functions in order to instantiate leadership. Based generally on the theories of speech acts (Searle 1969, 1979) and speech activities (see Fotion, 1971, 1979, 2003; van Eemeren 2002; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1988, 1990, 1992, 2004), I identified four pairs of core communicative practices that fulfill the leadership functions and can account for all communicative acts of leadership:

• **Reporting and Inquiring** – Offer and seek information to facilitate learning, understanding and insight

• **Directing and Pledging** – Obligate others and self to act to build commitment

• **Advocating and Envisioning** – Attempt to inspire, motivate, and influence either through a.) argument and reason concerning external facts and information, related to what is or what will soon be (advocating) or b.) expression of feelings and perceptions related to what should or ought to be (envisioning)

• **Declaring and Constituting** – Creating or changing social reality through a statement or proclamation either by assuming power (constituting) or relying on formal power (declaring)

Table 2 lays out the framework with examples of each leadership practice.

Based on the theoretical foundation of speech act/speech activities theory, I specified these eight core leadership practices through pragmatic analysis with respect to the necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful performance of each practice using Searle’s (1969) framework of constitutive rules – propositional content conditions; preparatory conditions; sincerity conditions; essential conditions (Table 3). These specifications disclosed the norms and conventions that govern the use of each core leadership practice, thereby identifying what “counts” as reporting, inquiring, advocating, envisioning, directing, pledging, constituting, and declaring. Considered as a set, the analyses of core leadership practices explain what it means to perform the communicative acts and activities that constitute leadership.
However, technical analysis only takes us to a certain point in the development of this theory. We must also consider the complexities of circumstance and context for how the framework operates as a whole to explore how these practices generate leadership at the collective level.

**Leadership Context and Culture**

The core leadership practices do not occur in isolation. Rather they operate in a more complex fashion, occurring sequentially, or together, often with one practice in service of another. Furthermore, the norms and conventions that govern the use of each core practice are social and cultural, as well as linguistic. The context and circumstances will be strong determinants of which practices will be more effective, better received, or more likely to be applied. Leadership practices must be appropriately matched to the circumstances (e.g., a crisis or a routine matter) and the context (e.g., a military unit or a grassroots community organization) will determine which practices are available.

As a symbolic activity, leadership depends upon the meaning-making resources in the ambient culture and the different interpretive rules of that culture that provide for that meaning making (see e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Morgan, 1997; Smircich, 1985; Weick, 2001). In consequence, cultural constructs determine the reception and success of leadership practices and leadership practices can shape the culture.

Consistent with the foregoing, this framework offers an integrated perspective on the communicative practice of leadership, providing a set of eight core practices that fulfill four functions of leadership, according to the research of the leadership field and based on speech act theory. This is a framework of leadership as a complex social process accessible to anyone, regardless of position or formal authority, via communicative practices. As a symbolic activity, leadership both influences and is influenced by the context and culture. Language and communication are always embedded in a social context. Accordingly, we cannot consider the practice and development of the core leadership practices without also considering the cultural milieu. One shapes the other.
The research and development implications for the use of this theory include:

1. The study of how the functions and practices of this framework work together and in what contexts and with what outcomes.

2. The study of how leadership emerges among groups, teams, organizations and communities and its impact.

3. Integrative scholarship from other fields and disciplines that can inform and shape our understanding of the performance and development of each practice.

4. Methods for developing leadership as both an individual capability and as a collective resource within organizations and communities.

This theory of communicative practice offers a simple set of practices that anyone can implement in order to engage in leadership. Despite the simplicity, the complex social process of leadership has not been boiled down to merely eight possible moves to be learned and performed in a formulaic manner. These practices can be developed and applied in increasingly varied, complex, and refined ways as the craft and artistry of leadership is honed and generated collectively.
Table 1

Functional Categories of Leadership Practice Derived from the Leadership Literature

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<tr>
<th>Functional Category of Leadership Practice</th>
<th>Support from the Leadership Literature</th>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitate Learning, Understanding, &amp; Insight</td>
<td>Interpersonal influence and relational dialogue (Drath, 2001); challenge the process and enable others to act (Kouzes &amp; Posner, 1995); coaching and supporting (Hersey &amp; Blanchard, 1969); meaning through communication (Bennis &amp; Nanus, 1985); idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass &amp; Avolio, 1990, 1993, 2000); supportive and participative (House &amp; Mitchell, 1974); listening and asking before telling and by accepting and empathizing with others (Greenleaf, 1977); asking questions, challenging norms, clarifying and integrating differences for learning needed to do adaptive work (Heifetz, 1994)</td>
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<td>Commit and Obligate</td>
<td>Directing &amp; delegating (Hersey &amp; Blanchard, 1969); direction (House &amp; Mitchell, 1974); idealized influence (Bass &amp; Avolio, 1990, 1993, 2000); setting direction (Drath, 2001); Model the way (Kouzes &amp; Posner, 1995); personal responsibility, (Drath, 2001); deployment of self and trust through positioning (Bennis &amp; Nanus, 1985); making self-sacrifices and taking personal risks to achieve the vision (Conger &amp; Kanungo, 1987, 1989); take responsibility and initiative to serve our communities and organizations (Heifetz, 1994)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspire and Motivate</td>
<td>Intellectual stimulation (Bass &amp; Avolio, 1990, 1993, 2000); Using persuasive appeals (Conger &amp; Kanungo, 1987, 1989); Inspire a shared vision, encourage the heart (Kouzes &amp; Posner, 1995); inspirational motivation (Bass &amp; Avolio, 1990, 1993, 2000); advocating a vision (Conger &amp; Kanungo, 1987, 1989); attention through vision (Bennis &amp; Nanus, 1985); envisioning (Barry, 1991)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create or Change Social Reality</td>
<td>Shared meaning making (Drath, 2001); sense making (Weick, 2001); constructivist leadership (Lambert, et al, 2002); leadership as the management of meaning (Smircich &amp; Morgan, 1982); management as symbolic action (Pfeffer, 1981); organizational symbolism (Pondy, Frost, Morgan, &amp; Dandridge, 1982); narrative (Gardner, 1995)</td>
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Table 2

Communicative Theory of Leadership Practice

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<th>LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS</th>
<th>LEADERSHIP PRACTICES</th>
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<td><strong>LEADERSHIP</strong>: A complex social process of securing action in service of the interests claimed by or for a team, organization, group, or community.</td>
<td><strong>Reporting</strong>: Offer information (Framing a problem; Pointing out an issue; Sharing observations; Offering feedback; Reporting perceptions, feelings, facts, and intentions; Conveying information; Stating a position)</td>
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<td>Build <strong>learning, understanding, and insight</strong> in order to secure action in service of shared interests.</td>
<td><strong>Inquiring</strong>: Seek information (Posing questions; Seeking input; Inviting information; Probing for understanding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build <strong>commitment and obligation</strong> in order to secure action in service of shared interests.</td>
<td><strong>Directing</strong>: Obligate others to act (Recommending; Advising; Suggesting Commanding; Ordering; Inviting; Making a request; Stating a need or desire.)</td>
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<td><strong>Inspire and motivate</strong> others in order to secure action in service of shared interests.</td>
<td><strong>Pledging</strong>: Obligate self to act (Promising; Publicly committing; Following through on verbal commitments via actions; Intentionally modeling behavior as a way to demonstrate commitment.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Create or change social reality</strong> in order to secure action in service of shared interests.</td>
<td><strong>Advocating</strong>: Attempt to influence related to what is or what will soon be; mainly argument and reason concerning external facts and information. (Arguing for a particular course of action; Prompting a group to make a decision or come to closure; Advocating to others on behalf of the team, organization, or community)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Envisioning</strong>: Attempt to influence related to what should or ought to be; mainly expressive concerning personal perceptions or feelings. (Conveying, discovering, or revealing hopes, wishes, stories, and images about what could or ought to be)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Declaring</strong>: Rely on formal power to create or change social or institutional reality through a statement or proclamation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Constituting</strong>: Assume power in order to create or change social or institutional reality through a statement or proclamation.</td>
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The leadership function of **directing builds commitment or obligation for action in service of community interests**. Directing serves this function by attempting to obligate others to act. On some occasions this objective is pursued through a direct order, even in a single sentence. On other occasions it is pursued through a request or statement of need or desire. These are polite or indirect forms of directing, which widen the scope of persons with standing to direct.

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<th>Elements of Analysis</th>
<th>Description of Each Element</th>
<th>Example Using ‘Directing’</th>
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<td><strong>Propositional Content Conditions</strong></td>
<td>Isolate the proposition from the rest of the speech activity and indicate what the speech activity and its elements are about. For instance, promising occurs when a speaker predicates an expression that he or she will perform a future act if x. One cannot promise to have done something nor promise that someone else will do something. The propositional content condition of promising is a future act of the speaker.</td>
<td>Speaker (S) expresses a desire, requirement, or need pertinent to community interests concerning a future act (A) of listener(s) (L).</td>
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| **Preparatory Conditions**                                                           | Required in order for the activity to make sense. For instance, the preparatory conditions of promising include: (a) that it is not obvious to the speaker and listener that the speaker is already going to fulfill the promise in the normal course of events, and (b) that the listener would prefer the speaker to fulfill the promise rather than to not fulfill the promise and that the speaker believes that the listener would prefer this. | • S must have standing with L in the venue at stake in the community.  
• It is not obvious to both S and L that L will do A in the normal course of events without being directed.  
• S believes that L is able to do A.  
• S wants L to do A.                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| **Sincerity Conditions**                                                             | Required for the activity to be authentic. These conditions address the psychological conditions of the speaker that are required for that act or activity. For promising, the speaker must intend to fulfill the promise and must believe that it is possible for him or her to fulfill the promise. Revising the condition that the speaker actually has the intention of doing x to the condition that the speaker takes responsibility for intending to do x is a way of modifying the conditions for an insincere promise. | S takes responsibility for believing that L doing A will serve the interests claimed by or for the community.                                                                                                                                           |
| **Essential Conditions**                                                             | Distinguish the activity from other activities. The essential conditions describe what the activity “counts as” and describe the purpose of the activity. Continuing with the example of promising, essential features include: the speaker intends that the utterance will put him or her under an obligation; the speaker intends for the listener to understand that the speaker is putting him or her self under an obligation. | Conveying this need or desire counts as an attempt by S to secure L’s commitment to do A.                                                                                                                                                               |
REFERENCES


