LEADERSHIP IN THE EYES OF FOLLOWERS: MAJOR LIMITATION TO THE RELEVANCE OF EMPIRICAL LEADERSHIP RESEARCH?

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ABSTRACT

The leadership literature is characterized mostly by studies in which leadership has been viewed from the points of view of their followers. This popular view is not peculiar to research as it is common to hear people talk about their leaders in various ways. Despite its popularity and the geometric increase in volumes of leadership research employing this approach over the years, leadership problems—at organizational and societal levels—continue unabated in many parts of the world; and have actually threatened mankind in some countries. The question of the effectiveness of seeing, describing, explaining, and predicting leadership from the standpoint of what followers see or say about their leaders becomes pertinent when contemporary leadership effectiveness is compared with historical accounts of leadership effectiveness. Where such a comparison produces an instructively significant difference, the rationale for comparing
contemporary with early/old but extant approaches to leadership research so as to know which is more effective becomes expedient.

Studies of leadership to date have thrived on theories. Leadership-Central.com (2014) chronicles the various theoretical approaches to leadership from the earliest/oldest to the contemporary. Historical accounts found on this website have it that the Great Man theory was the earliest of these theories. Evolved in the 19th century, around the 1840s, the Great Man theory sees great leaders as those who are destined by birth to become leaders, and as such will rise or emerge when confronted with the appropriate situation. Unarguably, many of the Heroes who revolutionized the world reigned during this period. It is instructive to conjecture that the best that leadership researchers could do at that time was to identify these people, once they emerged, and observe them live up to (or below) the expectations or presumptions of their followers.

Next to the Great Man theory is the Trait theory of leadership of the 1930s to the 1940s. This theory believes that to be great leaders, people have to either have been born or be made with certain qualities such as intelligence, sense of responsibility, creativity and other values that will make them excel in leadership roles. Focus of research here is on analyzing mental, physical and social characteristics in order to gain more understanding of what is the characteristic or the combination of characteristics that are common among leaders. This research focus was facilitated by developments in psychometrics which saw researchers attempting to analyze each trait with a view to understanding how it contributed to leadership excellence. This attempt was not quite successful.

Following the trait theory of leadership are the Behavioural theories which came between the 1940s and the 1950s as a reaction to the trait theory. This perspective focuses on the behaviours of the leaders as opposed to their mental, physical or social characteristics. Thus, with the evolutions in psychometrics, notably factor analysis, researchers were able to measure the cause and effect relationships of specific human behaviours from leaders. This development helped to change human orientation about leadership from that of “leaders are born” (in Great Man theory) to that of “leaders are made”.

Other groups of theories of leadership were built around the Behavioural theories as the leadership behaviour is central to all of them. These include the Contingency theories which
began in the 1960s; and the Transactional Leadership theories, and the Transformational Leadership theories both of which began in the 1970s.

As a critical look at the historical summary suggests, the great man and trait approaches study leadership mostly—if not entirely—from the standpoint of the leaders themselves; while the behavioural, contingency, transactional, and transformational approaches rely on the opinions or reports of followers to understand leadership in most leadership studies. Therefore, the popularity of researching leadership by surveying the opinions of followers is phenomenal. That this may be true is stressed by common knowledge that a leader is not just what s/he perceives himself/herself to be, but—for the most part—what he/she is perceived to be by his/her followers (Lord, 1986). The Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) [Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991]. The ILT focuses on followers’ perceptions of leaders arguing that perceptions of leadership can take place through either consciously inferential or spontaneous recognition processes. These perceptions form hierarchically ordered cognitive categories in followers’ minds, and as such, a leader’s effectiveness is determined in large part by followers’ perceptions of him/her. These cognitive categories are, essentially, leadership prototypes which are hierarchically organized such that each of the categories is represented by a prototype (or a mental image) of a leader that is based on prior knowledge about perceived underlying traits of that leader. Because—like stereotypes—these prototypes are believed to provide perceivers with a set of expectations regarding a leader’s appropriate traits and behaviour, they (the prototypes) constitute a follower’s implicit theory of leadership.

What this theory implies is that leadership and its success depend on the ability of leaders to embody their followers’ expectations. Leadership categorization approach recognizes that leadership is something that followers confer on leaders rather than something that leaders exhibit in the abstract. As such, leaders’ conformity to the expectations of subordinates is key to effective leadership. As part of the GLOBE project, House et al (2001, 2004) expanded the concept of individualized implicit leadership theories (ILT) into a cultural level theory which they labeled “culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory” (CLT). Six global leadership CLT dimensions specified by this theory include charismatic/value-based, team oriented, participatory, humane oriented, autonomous, and self-protective.
As critical examination of the various theoretical approaches and the research deriving from them would suggest, the concepts and instruments employed in majority of leadership studies around the world today have followers’ reports as units of measurement. These may be supplemented with leaders’ responses in some studies, but it is solely followers’ reports in most of them. While this is a complete departure from what used to be during the Great Man and Trait Theories era when measurements were solely based on leaders’ self-reports, leadership research that are based either entirely, mainly, or partially on followers’ reports do not seem to have impacted organizational and societal leadership as positively as would be expected in many societies. What this suggests is that across the world, leaders of old (including those that reigned during the Great Man and Trait theories era) appeared to be more heroic, patriotic, and trustworthy compared to today’s leaders, especially at the societal level. It is thus pertinent to examine this as the outcome would serve as pointers to the need to reconceptualize or even overall organization and society-level leadership research.

References

House, R., Hanges, P., Ruiz-Quintanilla, S.A., Dorfman, P., Javidan, M., Dickson, M., and About 170 GLOBE Country Co-Investigators to be listed by name and institution (In press) Cultural influences of leadership and organizations: project GLOBE


