



DLP

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Background Paper **04**

Conceptions of Leadership

Heather Lyne de Ver

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04

Conceptions of Leadership

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Introduction¹

There is now a wide recognition in the international community that 'leadership matters' for growth and development, just as there was recognition some years ago that 'institutions matter'.² But what is 'leadership'? How is it defined and can there be universal understandings and application of the concept?

Leadership is a concept which is often talked about, and which has generated a proliferation of literature, especially in the field of management and organizational science (Jones, 2005: 259). However, despite the almost unanimous agreement on the importance of leadership for the success of private sector organizations and institutions, and the countless works on the concept, "the field of leadership studies has not succeeded in articulating a coherent, paradigm-shifting model or approach that both scholars and practitioners can accept and work with" (Ibid., 259). There is no unanimity as to what 'leadership' means. This brief survey sets out a representative sample of some of the ways in which 'leadership' has been defined from within a number of very different disciplines and approaches. It concludes with a preliminary working definition of 'leadership' in a developmental context.

As will be apparent from what follows, the study of leadership has largely been dominated by scholars and practitioners working in management and organizational science, psychology and other related disciplines (Lyne de Ver, 2008), but has hardly been a central concern of political scientists (Peele, 2005), economists or development theorists. As such, many of the conceptions of leadership in the literature are Western-oriented, universalist or individualistic, and there are few conceptions which either incorporate a political understanding of leadership as a process or which have developmental salience. Moreover, apart from the many recent claims about the importance of leadership for growth and development, there has been little serious analysis of what this means in practice (and how it can be enhanced or supported) in the very often unstable, hybrid and evolving institutional contexts which characterise the condition of many developing countries.

The work of the Leaders, Elites and Coalitions Research programme (LECRP)³ has as one of its basic assumptions that 'leadership' needs to be understood politically, that is as a political process, which involves at least three critical aspects.

1. Leadership implies the organization or mobilization of people and resources (economic, political and other) in pursuit of particular ends.

¹ This paper was originally written and published under the auspices of the first phase of this work, then called the Leaders, Elites and Coalitions Research Program (LECRP).

² See the recent report of The Commission on Growth and Development (2008), *The Growth Report. Strategies for sustained growth and inclusive development* (Washington, The World Bank), and report of The Transatlantic Taskforce on Development (2009) *Toward a Brighter Future. A transatlantic call for renewed leadership and partnerships in global development* (Washington, DC., The German Marshall Fund of the United States). On the importance of institutions for growth and development, see The World Bank (2002) *World Development Report 2002, Building Institutions for Markets* (New York, Oxford University Press).

³ Now known as the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) see the website at www.dlprog.org

2. Leadership must always be understood contextually, occurring within a given indigenous configuration of power, authority and legitimacy, shaped by history, institutions, goals and political culture.
3. Leadership regularly involves forging formal or informal coalitions, vertical or horizontal, of leaders and elites, in order to solve the pervasive collective action problems which largely define the challenges of growth and development.

The developmental implications of this should be clear. Some of these ideas have been explored in the research programme of the LECRP, reports of which can be found on the LECRP website.

For the present, then, this brief survey outlines a representative sample of some of the prevailing conceptions of leadership in the literature as a background for developing a more robust and developmentally-relevant definition and understanding of the phenomenon which incorporates the above three elements more directly.

Conceptions

One of the foremost scholars of leadership, Barnard Bass, has described leadership as a “universal phenomenon” (1990b:4). He defines leadership as “an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perception and expectations of the members. Leaders are agents of change – persons whose acts affect other people more than other people’s acts affect them. Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group...It should be clear that with this broad definition, any member of the group can exhibit some amount of leadership, and the members will vary in the extent to which they do so” (1990: 19-20).

Bass also identifies numerous other definitions of leadership under the following groupings:

- **“The focus of group processes”**: For example, Cooley states that “the leader is always the nucleus of a tendency” (1902). Influenced by the needs of their followers, he/she then focuses the followers’ energies in a particular direction. The single leader embodies the collective will. Leadership is a function of needs existing, and is a relationship between leader and followers (Bass, 1990:11).
- **“Leadership as personality and its effects”**: For example, A. O. Bowden (1926) “equated leadership with strength of personality: ‘Indeed, the amount of personality attributed to an individual may not be unfairly estimated by the degree of influence he can exert upon others’” (Bass, 1990:26). Or, Bingham (1927) defined leadership as a person possessing of the “greatest number of desirable traits of personality and character” (Bass, 1990:12). Personality theorists “regard leadership as a one-way effect: Leaders possess qualities that differentiate them from followers” (Bass, 1990:12). This does not acknowledge the impact followers have upon leaders.
- **“Leadership as the art of inducing compliance”**: For example, Munson (1921) stated that leadership is “the ability to handle men so as to achieve the most with the least friction and the greatest cooperation...Leadership is the creative and directive force of morale” (Bass, 1990:12). B.V. Moore (1927) stated that leadership can be defined as “the ability to impress the will of the leader on those led and induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation” (Bass, 1990:12). This perspective also regards leadership as “a unidirectional exertion of influence and as an instrument for moulding the group to the leader’s will.” This is seen as possibly “legitimizing an authoritarian concept of leadership” (Bass, 1990:13).
- **“Leadership as the exercise of influence”**: This reflects a move towards generality or abstraction. J.B. Nash (1929) saw leadership as “influencing change in the conduct of people.” (Bass, 1990:13). Stogdill (1950) stated that leadership was “the process of influencing the activities of an organized group

in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement” (Bass, 1990: 13). This is a more interactive view of the relationship between leaders and followers. Hemphill (1949) and Bass (1960) state that “an individual’s effort to change the behaviour of others is attempted leadership. When the other members actually change, this creation of change in others is successful leadership. If the others are reinforced or rewarded for changing their behaviour, this evoked achievement is effective leadership” (Bass, 1990:13). ‘Influence’ reflects the idea that there is a difference in the extent to which individuals affect the group. There is no single leader who influences all equally, without a feedback relation. This allows for a less dominating role for the leader. “Leaders serve as models for the followers. As Gandhi suggested: ‘clean examples have a curious method of multiplying themselves’” (Bass, 1990: 13-14). Proviso: some think that leadership is a discretionary influence only – i.e. that which is not mandated by the leader’s role. “Thus, managers are leaders only when they take the opportunity to exert influence over activities beyond what has been prescribed as their role requirements” (Bass, 1990: 14). E.g. J. A. Miller (1973) and Jacobs & Jaques (1987).

- **“Leadership as an act or behaviour”**: The followers of this perspective define leadership in terms of actions and behaviours. E.g. Fiedler (1967) – “By leadership behaviour we generally mean the particular acts in which a leader engages in the course of directing and coordinating the work of his group members.

This may involve such acts as structuring the work relations, praising or criticizing group members, and showing consideration for their welfare and feelings” (Bass, 1990: 14).

- **“Leadership as a form of persuasion”**: Several theorists saw leadership as “successful persuasion without coercion” (Bass, 1990:14). For example, Neustadt (1960) concluded, from his study of U.S. presidents, that presidential leadership stems from the power to persuade. Schenk (1928) stated that “leadership is the management of men by persuasion and inspiration rather than by the direct or implied threat of coercion” (Bass, 1990:14). This definition is favoured generally by students of politics and social movements “and by military and industrial theorists who were opposed to authoritarian concepts ... Persuasion can be seen as one form of leadership” (Bass, 1990:15).
- **“Leadership as a power relation”**: The view of most political theorists (from Machiavelli to Marx) was that power was the basis of political leadership. “Power is regarded as a form of influence relationship. It can be observed that some leaders’ tendencies to transform any leadership opportunity into an overt power relation, combined with the often undesirable consequences for individuals and societies, has induced many theorists to reject the notion of authoritarian leadership” (Bass, 1990:15). This is a realist view of leadership; the power relation may be overt, covert or unrecognised and the sources of power may vary too.
- **“Leadership as an instrument of goal achievement”**: This perspective looks at leadership in terms of its ability to satisfy a group’s needs and meet its goals. It has commonly been used by the classical organizational theorists who “defined leadership in terms of achieving a group’s objectives” (Bass, 1990: 15). For example, R.C. Davis (1942) “referred to leadership as ‘the principal dynamic force that motivates and coordinates the organization in the accomplishment of its objectives’” (Ibid.). In this sense “leadership transforms followers, creates visions of the goals that may be attained, and articulates for the followers the ways to attain those goals” (Bass, 1990b: 16).
- **“Leadership as an emerging effect of interaction”**: This perspective sees leadership not as a cause of group action but as an effect of it. For example, Bogardus (1929) stated that “as a social process, leadership is that social interstimulation which causes a number of people to set out toward an old goal with new zest or a new goal with hopeful courage – with different persons keeping different places” (Bass, 1990: 16). This theoretical perspective, importantly, called attention to the idea that emergent leadership grows out of the process of interaction. “It can be observed that leadership truly only exists when it is acknowledged and conferred by other members of the group” (Ibid.). Thus leaders can emerge passively, through acknowledging the status and responsibility assigned to them by the group.
- **“Leadership as a differentiated role”**: This takes its basis from role theory, under which each member of a group occupies a position in the community/group as well as in various other organizations/institutions. Each position is more or less well-defined, and provides the member with a role to play.

For example, “according to the leader of Ponape, Heinrich Iriarte, some Micronesians are born to rule while others are born to serve” (Paige, 1977, 65 quoted in Bass, 1990: 16-17). Leadership, here is seen as an aspect of role differentiation. For T. Gordon (1955), “leadership was an interaction between a person and a group or, more accurately, between a person and the group members. Each participant in this interaction played a role. These roles differed from each other; the basis for their difference was a matter of influence – that is, one person, the leader, influenced, and the other persons responded” (Summarised in Bass, 1990: 17). “Of all the available definitions, the role conception of leadership is most firmly buttressed by research findings....Leadership as a differentiated role is required to integrate the various other roles of the group and to maintain unity of action in the group’s effort to achieve its goals” (Bass, 1990: 17).

- **“Leadership as the initiation of structure”**: Several commentators viewed leadership “not as the passive occupancy of a position or as acquisition of a role but as a process of originating and maintaining the role structure – the pattern of role relationships” (Bass, 1990: 17). For example, Gouldner (1950) stated that there is a difference between a stimulus from a leader and a stimulus from a follower – “in the probability that the stimulus will structure the group’s behaviour. The stimulus from a leader has a higher probability of structuring a group’s behaviour because of the group-endowed belief that the leader is a legitimate source of such stimuli” (summarised in Bass, 1990: 17). Stogdill (1959) “defined leadership as ‘the initiation and maintenance of structure in expectation and interaction’” (quoted in Bass, 1990: 17). This definition leads to a “consideration of the basic processes involved in the emergence of the leadership role” (Bass, 1990: 18). But: “if structure is the consistent pattern of differentiated role relationships within a group, we must be sure also to consider the persons, resources, and tasks within differentiated roles” (ibid.).
- **“Leadership as a combination of elements”**: Many combine several definitions to cover a larger set of meanings. For example, for Jago (1982) “leadership is the exercise of noncoercive influence to coordinate the members of an organized group to accomplishing the group’s objectives. Leadership is also a set of priorities attributed to those who are perceived to use such influences successfully” (summarised in Bass, 1990: 18). For Tichy and Devanna (1986), also, “the combination of power with personality defines the transformational leader as a skilled, knowledgeable change agent with power, legitimacy, and energy. Such a leader is courageous, value driven, and able to deal with ambiguity and complexity” (summarised in Bass, 1990: 18).

In addition to Bass’s collection, there are also many other different attempts to define ‘leadership’ as a concept, which have had very different results. The sample given below provides an indication of the breadth of the various attempts.

Jago (1982), in seeking to combine the ideas of ‘process’ and ‘property’ in his conception of leadership offers a useful definition:

Leadership is both a process and a property. The process of leadership is the use of non-coercive influence to direct and coordinate the activities of the members of an organized group toward the accomplishment of group objectives. As a property, leadership is the set of qualities or characteristics attributed to those who are perceived to successfully employ such influence (Jago, 1982:315).

But he also qualifies this by saying:

Leadership is not only some quality or characteristic that one possesses or is perceived to possess, it can be something that one does. It therefore can describe an act as well as a person. Leadership does not involve the use of force, coercion or domination and is not necessarily implied by the use of such titles as manager, supervisor, or superior. In this respect, the definition provides a conceptual distinction between leadership processes and motivational processes, the latter being the more appropriate domain for any discussion of the administration of discretionary rewards and punishments made possible by some formal authority structure. Leadership is therefore distinct from ‘supervision’ or what might be termed ‘headship’” (p. 316).

Nye (2008: xi), states:

I define leaders as those who help a group create and achieve shared goals. Some try to impose their own goals, others derive them more from the group, but leaders mobilize people to reach those objectives. Leadership is a social relationship with three key components – leaders, followers, and the contexts in which they interact.

Nye's conception of 'good' and 'effective' leadership involves a combination of soft power skills, hard power skills, and what Nye calls contextual intelligence – which is the ability to know when to use which combination of the above skills.

Dwight Eisenhower argued that leadership is an ability "to get people to work together, not only because you tell them to do so and enforce your orders but because they instinctively want to do it for you ...You don't lead by hitting people over the head; that's assault, not leadership" (quoted in Axelrod, 2006: 120).

Burns (1977) states that leadership arises in the transformation of wants (primal desires like a baby wanting nourishment) into needs (socialised, widely sanctioned wants). For example, a baby wants nourishment but will as easily eat or drink things that are bad for, or harmful to him. The parent transforms this 'want' into 'needs' for milk, food etc. in pursuit of aims set out by the parents not the baby – this is leadership according to Burns.

Peele (2005) states that leadership should be thought of in terms of six dimensions, which allow for a clear balance and cross-contextual applicability. These are: the character of the leader; the followers; the organizational/societal context; the problems which confront the leader; the techniques the leader uses to gain support for her agenda/position; and, the effects of leadership (p. 191). Much leadership literature assumes 'a leader', but Peele sees that leadership may well be shared or diffused. Leadership is a differentiated and distinct role: Political leadership is usually exercised on the basis of the holding of a legally attributed office, and the leaders' position is usually durable (Peele, 2005: 191).

Burns (1978) states that "Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage and satisfy the motives of followers" (p. 18). It is exercised to realise the goals of both leaders and followers in the context of competition and conflict. As different leaders must be contending, it therefore involves engagement with followers' motives as opposed to pure power, where no competition is involved and therefore there is no engagement.

Ohno & Shimamura (2007: 3) state that 'good' leadership involves providing long-term development vision, and possessing a strong political will to realise that vision.

The Performance Innovation Unit (PIU) (2007) explored the Trait approach. This places emphasis on the selection rather than development of leaders, that is on innate qualities. Psychologists are generally supportive of this approach but others are critical of its assumption that personality is stable. The tests construct rather than discover these traits in the subjects. This tends to see leadership as an individual position, which is counter to more recently accepted ideas that leadership is a collective process, in which case personal traits are not as important as the ability to motivate others, to work collaboratively or to solve collective action problems.

Trait vs. Behaviours. Jago (1982) argues that:

...perspectives differ in the way the leadership construct is conceptualized. It is possible to view leadership primarily in terms of relatively stable and enduring characteristics of people. Leadership can be viewed as a trait (or set of traits) distributed in some way among the population. In this sense, leadership is viewed as a measurable and quantifiable property possessed in different amounts by different people. Alternatively, it is possible to focus on observable leader behaviours rather than on inherent traits. From such a perspective, leadership exists primarily in the actions of the leader. Leadership is expressed in terms of overt behavior patterns rather than in terms of some intrinsic property or characteristic (p. 316).

Universal vs. Contingent Theories. Here, Jago (1982) suggests that:

Certain perspectives make the implicit assumption that what constitutes successful or effective leadership does not depend on the characteristics of the situation in which the leader operates. Leadership is proposed to be a general as opposed to a specific phenomenon; that is, what constitutes effective leadership for the corporation president is essentially the same as that for the shop-floor foreman, clergyman, or Cub Scout den mother. Moreover, leadership is invariant within, as well as between, roles (p. 316).

On the other hand, the contingent perspective suggests that effective leadership depends on specific features of the leader's situation. "These approaches propose certain situational variables that, when assessed, provide a situational diagnosis on which leadership prescriptions are based. These theories therefore provide contingent prescriptions for leadership; that is, prescriptions contingent on certain situational factors" (Jago, 1982: 316).

Unorthodox leadership skills theory: This approach, as laid out by Badaracco (2002), argues that it is unorthodox skills, rather than those most commonly cited – charisma, superior intelligence, uncompromising reason, etc. – that matter for 'leadership', i.e. negotiation, persuasion and people management skills – the so-called 'quiet skills'.

Where there is not inherent alignment between the interests of the organisation and the interests of the individual, it is the job of the leader to persuade and negotiate with the individual to act in the interests of the organisation. Logic and reasoning are inadequate bases for leadership in this case. As a corollary to this, a leader is required to negotiate through multiple often overlapping and contradictory accountabilities and responsibilities. For example, a leader may be required to minimise staff costs, maximise staff satisfaction, minimise production costs, maximise quality etc. and hence will need the skills to negotiate a working compromise.

Leadership as differentiated from 'management': Iles & Preece (2006) explain the conception of leadership as differentiated from management: "whereas managers are concerned with today, with delivery, targets, efficiency, utilization, and authority, focusing on internal organizational issues, on control and on doing things right, leaders are held to be oriented to tomorrow, to development, to direction, to purpose and vision, and to innovation" (p. 319).

GLOBE definition of leadership: The GLOBE studies define leadership as "[t]he ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute towards the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members" (House et al., 2004: 15). This is contextually determined, as the attributes and entities that differentiate a specified culture are predictive of organizational practices and leader attributes and behaviours most frequently enacted and effective in that culture.

Whilst the GLOBE studies incorporate the importance of context in determining the nature of leadership, they do not present any notion of the political nature of the leadership process. This political understanding is particularly lacking in organizational conceptions of leadership like the GLOBE study, because in the context of an organization with a simple monocratic hierarchy there is little competition between different leaders. As such, these conceptions have little relevance when applied in the context of non-hierarchical organizations, civil society organizations, political institutions and communities.

Conclusion: towards a developmental conception of leadership

It is clear that the majority of conceptions of leadership largely neglect the importance of context and the political nature of leadership. Instead there is a strong tendency to conceive of leadership in terms of traits, characteristics, styles or behaviours.

However, from a 'developmental' point of view, leadership is better understood as a political process that is contextually contingent and reflects the three factors mentioned earlier (see page 2):

1. Leadership implies the organization or mobilization of people and resources (economic, political and other) in pursuit of particular ends.
2. Leadership must always be understood contextually, occurring within a given indigenous configuration of power, authority and legitimacy, shaped by history, institutions, goals and political culture.
3. Leadership regularly involves forging formal or informal coalitions, vertical or horizontal, of leaders and elites, in order to solve the pervasive collective action problems which largely define the challenges of growth and development.

In the developing world, especially in weak, fragile and evolving states, where informal institutions play a larger role and take a variety of hybrid forms, the impact of the context upon leadership is even greater and shapes both the limits and possibilities of leadership. In this respect, indigenous leaders and leadership are therefore the key to establishing, maintaining, and implementing appropriate, legitimate and feasible local institutional arrangements. And we need to know a great deal more about the variety of its forms – and especially the evolving hybrid forms.

As a preliminary working definition of 'leadership' for developmental purposes, the following might serve as a starting point:

Developmental leadership is the process of organizing or mobilizing people and resources in pursuit of particular ends or goals, in given institutional contexts of authority, legitimacy and power (often of a hybrid kind). Achieving these ends, and overcoming the collective action problems which commonly obstruct such achievement, normally requires the building of formal or informal coalitions of interests, elites and organizations, both vertical and horizontal.

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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) addresses an important gap in international thinking and policy about the critical role played by leaders, elites and coalitions in the politics of development. This growing program brings together government, academic and civil society partners from around the world to explore the role of human agency in the processes of development. DLP will address the policy, strategic and operational implications of 'thinking and working politically' - for example, about how to help key players solve collective action problems, forge developmental coalitions, negotiate effective institutions and build stable states.

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