

# AN INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP THEORY

Alberto Silva

Keiser University

Corresponding author: Alberto Silva, Ph.D. asilva@ keiseruniversity.edu

## ABSTRACT

There are so many proposed leadership theories that this field of knowledge seems very chaotic. However, those theories are not conflicting explanations of the leadership process, but mostly complementary and oriented to different aspects of the same phenomena. A simple model is suggested in this article to elaborate a unified or integrated leadership theory, just by putting together the pieces of the puzzle. The proposed leadership theory is based on the fact that leadership is a process that involves the leader, the followers and the context. All of these three perspectives should be added to conform a better picture.

**Keywords:** leadership, theory, organizational behavior, business, management

## INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the world of leadership theories looks very confusing and complicated. There are new theories being added almost every year to the large number of theories that have been proposed, creating a difficult picture to understand. However, the reality is that all leadership theories can be classified into two major groups or categories, not exclusive but complementary. Leadership theories can be classified into theories oriented to the leader as individual and theories oriented to the relations between leader and followers. Yukl (2006) suggested that existing leadership theories could also be classified as descriptive versus prescriptive theories and universal versus contingency theories. However, the leader versus follower-centered theories represent a good categorization of the leadership theories and an effective way of organizing their study.

## THEORIES ORIENTED TO THE LEADER

Theories oriented to the leader are characterized by the focus on the leader, assuming that leadership is mainly a personal quality. They include the following:

### Trait Theories

During World War II, many researchers were interested in identifying individual traits of effective leaders. These studies were based on the idea that leaders not only had common traits, but these traits were different from those who were not leaders. Therefore, defining leadership traits would make possible to identify individuals with leadership potential and develop them as leaders in the military and other organizations. However, Stogdill (1948) reviewed more than 100 articles written about the trait theory and concluded that a person does not become a leader by possessing certain traits. Personality traits are not sufficient for becoming a leader, as Stogdill found, but some traits are necessary according to Avolio (2011). Avolio estimated that about 30 % of leadership development is due to innate personality features. Therefore, although the trait theory is not accepted today as it was originally proposed it remains partially valid in the sense that leaders really need some personality traits to be effective.

### Behavior Approaches

Lewin and Lippert (1938) worked in a different direction from the trait theory, looking for the appropriate behavior to be a good leader. These authors considered that leaders were either autocratic or democratic, and later Tannebaum and Schmidt (1958) suggested that a combination of both styles was possible and desirable depending on organizational circumstances. Blake and Mouton (1985) proposed a slightly different approach, analyzing when leaders should give more attention to the task or to the people depending on the context

### Contingency Theories

Fiedler (1954) was a pioneer in the field of contingency theories of leadership. Although somewhat similar to the behavior approaches, Fiedler and his followers were interested in showing that a certain behavior does not always determine effective leadership, since the style should be appropriate to the situation. Lorsch (2010) defended the validity of the contingency theory of leadership and in particular Fiedler's ideas about the influence of contingent factors as the leader's relationship with subordinates and the power of the leader, as well as his argument that instead

of the leader changing his or her style according to the situation is easier to select the leader whose style has a better fit to a given situation.

### **Leader's Virtues**

In the current stage of leadership research, it is commonly accepted that leaders should: a) be authentic, acting as they are, without trying to imitate anyone (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007); b) have an ethical behavior, so that people can trust them (Mendenhall, et al., 2013); c) be responsible, making business decisions that takes into account not only the interests of shareholders, but also other stakeholders such as employees, customers, the environment, the community and future generations (Waldman & Balden, 2014); d) be able to handle crisis and survive to them (George, 2009); and e) show adaptability, applying creativity to decision making in a difficult and unexpected context in order to cope with complexity (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009)

### **Women Leadership Theories**

Ibarra, Ely and Kolb (2013) argued that there are many barriers for women to be leaders, but simply identifying existing prejudices can help men and women understand what happens, and in particular free women to focus more on leadership and less on how they are perceived. The effectiveness of women as leaders depends on their own attitude and the acceptance of their leadership style in a given context.

## **THEORIES ORIENTED TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADER AND FOLLOWERS**

While recognizing the importance of theories oriented to the leader as an individual, theories oriented to the relationship between leader and followers prevail today. Theories oriented to the relationship between leader and followers include:

### **Transformational Leadership**

Burns (1978) identified two general types or models of leadership: transactional leadership and transformational or transforming leadership. By introducing the concept of transformational leadership, Burns began one of the approaches to leadership that remains more relevant today. According to Daft (2008), transformational leadership is characterized by the ability to cause significant changes in both the followers and the organization. Several studies that have shown positive and consistent relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and organizational performance (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013).

### **Power-Influence Approach**

Machiavelli, a pioneer in power and political science studies, discussed the pragmatic behavior that should have a ruler or political leader to succeed. Kotter (1979) and Pfeffer (1981) are two contemporary authors who have revived the interest in leadership as an exercise of power in organizations. Kotter showed how leaders can develop sufficient unofficial resources of power and influence to get the support that they need from subordinates, peers and superiors. Pfeffer affirmed that potential leaders should stop looking at the world as a just and fair place and actively develop the skills necessary to acquire and use power. Nye (2010) argued that power and leadership are inseparable and leaders must learn the different conditions under which combine hard power resources, like rewards and punishments, and soft power resources, like persuasion, for smart use of power.

### **Servant Leadership**

The concept of servant leadership was introduced by Greenleaf (1991), in line with the leadership thought of Lao Tzu, an ancient Chinese thinker, to describe a leader who listens, supports and seeks to build a community.

### **Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

Liden et al. (1993) proposed the theory of exchange between leaders and followers. According to this theory, leaders and followers must be able to develop effective relationships that result in progressive mutual influence.

### **Shared Leadership**

Pearce and Conger (2003) suggested that leadership must be seen as a process in which many persons of the team are involved. Ibarra and Hansen (2011) affirmed that collaborative leadership is the appropriate leadership style for a hyper-connected world, which makes unsuitable styles of command and control or consensus.

### Diversity and Multicultural Leadership

Mendenhall et al. (2013) suggested that a leader of global organizations should develop: a) multicultural leadership competencies, such as cultural intelligence or the ability to function effectively in diverse cultural contexts; b) cross-cultural communication skills; c) cross-cultural management of ethical issues; d) global mindset or set of individual attributes that enable global leaders to influence those that are different from them; and e) cosmopolitanism or level of natural interest and curiosity about different countries and cultures to that of oneself.

### Team Leadership

Mendenhall et al. (2013) noted that studies show that teams in which people work face-to-face outperform virtual teams. However, virtual teams are inevitable in today's organizations, geographically dispersed, and leaders should ensure that members of these teams meet with a certain frequency, to talk and discuss with the aim of sharing tacit knowledge and developing stronger relationships, and use a variety of technologies, depending on the different aspects of the team task.

### CONTEXT INFLUENCE

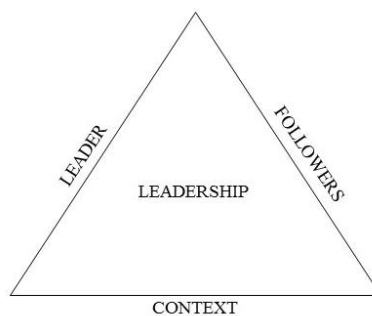
Avolio (2007), Javidan, et al. (2010), and Kellerman (2014) are some of the authors that insisted in the influence of the context in the leadership process. These scholars affirm that leadership culture has been changing dramatically with history, and that it is not the same to lead in China, United States, Brazil or England. Avolio (2007) also affirmed that the relationship between the leader and the followers is a result of the organizational climate in which it takes place.

### INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP THEORY

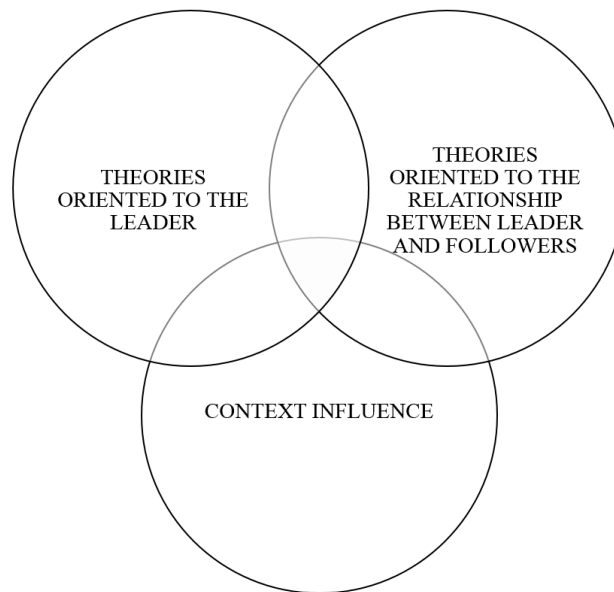
Yukl (2006), Avolio (2007), and Mendenhall, et al. (2013), among other authors, expressed the need for integration of the different leadership theories. An integrative approach seems quite feasible, at least in very simple terms. As can be observed from the previous description, the leadership theories that have been proposed are not different explanations of the same phenomena but different perspectives of it. None of these theories is in conflict with another; on the contrary, the theories are mostly complementary. Therefore we can assume that instead of many theories there is a single theory of leadership with different approaches within the general body of knowledge of this field of study.

Avolio (2007) and Kellerman (2014) suggested that leadership is made of three components: leader, followers and context. An equilateral triangle, as shown in Figure 1, has been proposed by Kellerman (2014) to show the similar importance and the close relationship between these three components.

**Figure 1.** Leadership components



The different leadership theories that have been discussed above could be easily integrated, using the triangle model proposed by Kellerman (2014), as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Integration of leadership theories

Building upon the scheme shown in Figure 2, an integrated leadership theory could then be developed. A theory is a set of principles that provide an explanation of some aspect of the natural or social world, based in observation, experimentation, and reasoning. The four basic principles of an integrated theory of leadership could be expressed as follows: a) leadership is the process of achieving the desired goals of an organization or society involving a leader and the collaboration between the leader and the followers within a given context; b) leaders are primarily made, but they are also born with characteristics of intelligence, creativity and personality that are not sufficient but necessary for them to become leaders; c) the main task of the leader is to cause a change in the followers and in the society or organization that is involved; and d) the historical context, the culture, and the organizational climate are external factors that impact to a great extent the leadership process.

## CONCLUSION

The disparities between the different leadership theories or approaches that have been proposed in the last eight decades are only superficial. In reality, those theories are oriented to different aspects of the same phenomena, and integration is not only necessary but feasible. A simple model has been suggested in this article to elaborate a unified or integrated leadership theory, just by putting together the pieces of the puzzle. The proposed leadership theory is based on the fact that leadership is a process that involves a leader, the relation between the leader and his or her followers, and the context. All of these three perspectives have been added to conform a better picture. The resulting conceptual model could be used to help people know, understand, or simulate the complex subject of leadership.

## REFERENCES

- Avolio, B. J. (2007). Promoting more integrated strategies for leadership theory-building. *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 25-33.
- Avolio, B. J. (2011). *Full-range leadership development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Avolio, B. J., & Yammarino, F. J. (2013). *Transformational and charismatic leadership: The road ahead*. New York: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Bennis, W., & Thomas, R. J. (2002, September). Crucibles of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 39-45.
- Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1985). *The managerial grid III*. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Daft, R. L. (2008). *The leadership experience* (4th ed.). Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning.
- Fiedler, F. E. (1954, July). Assumed similarity measures as predictors of team effectiveness. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49(3), 381-388.

- George, B., Sims, P., McLean, A. N., & Mayer, D. (2007, February). Discovering your authentic leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(2).
- George, W. W. (2009). *Seven lessons for leading in crisis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1991). *The servant as leader*. Indianapolis, IN: Robert K. Greenleaf Center.
- Heifetz, R., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Harvard Business Press.
- Ibarra, H., & Hansen, M. T. (2011, July-August). Are you a collaborative leader? *Harvard Business Review*, 89(7/8), 68-74.
- Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., Howell, J. P., & Hanges, P. J. (2010). Leadership and cultural context. In N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* (pp. 346-372). Boston, MA: Harvard Review Press.
- Kellerman, B. (2014). *Hard times: Leadership in America*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books.
- Kotler, J. P. (1979). *Power in management*. New York: Amacom Books.
- Lewin, K., & Lippitt, R. (1938). An experimental approach to the study of autocracy and democracy: a preliminary note. *Sociometry*, 1, 292-300.
- Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., & Stilwell, D. (1993). A longitudinal study on the early developments of leader-member exchanges. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(4), 662-674.
- Lorsch, J. (2010). A contingency theory of leadership. In N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* (pp. 411-429). Harvard Business Press.
- Mendenhall, M. E., Osland, J., Bird, A., Oddou, G. R., Maznevski, M. L., Stevens, M., & Stahl, G. K. (2013). *Global leadership* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Nye, J. S. (2010). Power and leadership. In N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* (pp. 305-332). Harvard Business Press.
- Pearce, C. L., & Conger, J. A. (Eds.). (2003). *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pfeffer, J. (1981). *Power in organizations*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Stogdill, R. M. (1948). Personal factors associated with leadership: A survey of the literature. *Journal of Psychology*, 25, 35-71.
- Tannenbaum, R., & Schmidt, W. H. (1958). How to choose a leadership pattern. *Harvard Business Review*, 36, 95-101.
- Waldman, D. A., & Balven, R. M. (2014). Responsible leadership: Theoretical issues and research directions. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 28(3), 224-234.
- Yukl, G. A. (2005). *Leadership in organizations* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Dr. Alberto Silva is a full-time professor at Keiser University. He earned a Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of Almeria, Spain. His career includes managing responsibilities for more than thirty years in the private and public sector and more than fifteen years as management professor at graduate level at several universities. Dr. Silva is the author of a book on Management and of several articles on innovation and leadership.