

Leadership Theory and Education: Building Bridges or Digging Chasms

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Commentary

“Leaders mull ways to handle world problems” the headline read. I paused and considered the writer’s intent of the word “leader” as I often do when I see any form of the word used. Does the writer mean leader as in position, influence, or behaviors? Are these leaders genuinely, as Peter Northouse (2007) defined, influencing “a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3)? Sadly, it is often difficult with articles in the media and throughout society to distinguish a writer or speaker’s intended meaning of the words *leader* or *leadership*. For most readers, watchers, and listeners of the media in our society, it seems the word leadership is taken at face value – but what is face value for the word leadership? In other words, how does society define leadership?

So the real question – are we, as academicians, creating meaning about leadership for society or are we creating, with our research and theories, an even greater distance and disconnect? I find myself devoting more and more time to this question because I have a strong interest in both leadership studies and the media. Frequently I hear the words leader or leadership as I continuously consume media on a daily basis. From National Public Radio (NPR) to the *Wall Street Journal* the words leader and leadership are all around us. Depending on the context and the lens through which I view them, the words leader and leadership range from having abundant meaning (as defining people who do correspond to a leadership definition or theory) to having no meaning at all (when the words are used because none other works or are not suitable for print). Few others it seems, including media types and leadership academicians, give much thought to this quandary. Is it an issue that so few in our society know there is a body of research supporting the theories, models, and concepts of leadership studies?

Maybe I have always been a skeptic. After several months of intense doctoral study in leadership studies, I began to piece together some of the leadership theories only to realize that Bernard Bass had little original work. The *Handbook*

was once Stogdill's, *Transformational Leadership* was once Burns' *Transforming Leadership* and Vroom and Yetton's *Normative Decision Making Process*. Bass, I contended was the John Tesh of leadership. A mentor of mine was quick to point out that Bass was an elaborator and a translator. He made erudite theories palatable and pragmatic enough for the corporate world, she explained. If so, how is it that Steven Covey, Max DePree, or any of the other "airport" leadership writers are not noted on the hierarchy of leadership studies or included in books such as *Classics of Organizational Behavior*? The airport leadership writers bring to light leadership concepts that are often voraciously consumed by the masses in the business world. Of course, the answer most of my colleagues would give me is that the airport books are not based on theory, but rather on gimmicks or smoke and mirrors. While I understand this answer, I wonder if those writers are not doing academics a favor because they at least get the business types talking about leadership.

In the same way I have doubts about shunning the airport leadership books, I find myself wondering if the same is true for other professions. For instance, when a parent is sitting on the park bench reading Sal Severe's *How To Behave So Your Children Will, Too* does the local child psychologist, Ph.D. of course, roll her eyes thinking, "What a disservice that book does for the profession?" As a parent with far more questions than answers, I hope not. From staying happy to financial coaching to marriage counseling, similar advice is available in many disciplines, and generally the less tied to academia it is the more likely it will hit a *New York Times Best Seller List*.

But leadership, it seems, is different because of its prevalence in our everyday lives. While I have not been checking, I cannot imagine that a day goes by when I do not hear or read the word leader or leadership. It is the popularity of these words that make me wonder why those in general society (including media writers) *do not* know that people actually study the many elements of the leadership phenomenon. To be sure, when I first mentioned to my parents (both fiscal manager types) I was considering getting my doctorate in leadership studies, their perplexed looks were followed by an explanation from me, and eventually followed by a supportive, but unsure response. My brother, the engineer, told me leadership was a fad that was the first line item cut in times of financial plight. We are now in a historical financial and social plight and the call for leadership seems to be only greater than ever before. But, yet again, what truly does the call for leadership mean?

A leadership academician and theorist such as Burns might say the call for leadership is for a transformational leader who could morally lift our society out of the irresponsible decisions that have been made throughout financial markets and personal home buying. Or we might need to go back to the theories of Weber (cited in Bass and Riggio, 2006, p. 11) who "emphasized the extent that the

charismatic leader directed dependent followers out of crises with radical solutions to deal with their problems.” With world financial markets in turmoil, radical solutions may be what we need, but is that what the media mean when they write headlines such as *The Leadership Vacuum: In This Economic Crisis, Whom Can We Turn To?*

Other theorists, such as Edgar Schein (1992), might say that leaders are needed to turn around the irresponsible and greedy cultures of financial institutions. Schein wrote that “one could argue that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to understand and work within culture” (p. 5). Of course, Schein does note that while leaders create and manage culture, they are not entirely responsible for organizational culture. To be sure, Schein continues, “Culture is the result of a complex group learning process that is only partially influenced by leader behavior.” (p. 5). However, in all too many situations in corporate and political America, it has been the function of leadership that caused the threat to the organization’s survival, and often it was too late to do something about the situation.

Despite being on the brink of financial collapse, the heads, or leaders as they have been called, of the Big Three United States auto makers made their first trip to Congress to beg for money in their private jets. If, as Schein writes, “The group’s survival is threatened because elements of its culture have become maladapted, it is ultimately the function of leadership to recognize and do something about the situation” (p. 5) then these so-called leaders did something by making matters worse. Their greedy and selfish actions created a culture of more-for-less throughout each of the companies, and they are now maladapted to thrive in a competitive economy where other automakers’ employees are getting much less to do much more. Did they reach a common goal toward which the industry leaders and the leaders of the United Auto Workers have been working for decades? It seems they did, which begs the question, *Can leadership mean running something into the ground and out of existence?* If so, it seems there were many great leaders guiding corporations through recent years such as Lehman Brothers, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac. If this is leadership, maybe we need to move away from creating new theories and revisit the theories and philosophies of great thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, or Immanuel Kant.

So back to the question of academicians creating leadership meaning or disconnect for society. Sadly it seems more disconnect than meaning, as there is little meaning in theory for many. Theories, if better translated by academics into literature not limited to academic journals, could offer genuine guidance where common sense and experience have failed. What if presidents turned to classic readings and theories in books like *The Leader’s Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages* edited by J. Thomas Wren, or *Leadership:*

Understanding the Dynamics of Power and Influence in Organizations edited by Robert P. Vecchio, or one of my personal favorites, *Business Leadership: A Jossey-Bass Reader*? What if presidents, CEOs and state and civic leaders understood leadership concepts such as Fiedler's Contingency Model, Tuckman and Jansen's stages of small group development, and Graen and Uhl-Bien's Leader-Member Exchange, or just understood the differences between Jerry Harvey's *Abilene Paradox* and Irving Janis' *Groupthink*? Alas, leadership books wrought from research do not seem to be what presidents or other leaders in society read.

During an interview with 60 Minutes in the first few days after his election, President Barak Obama said that he was reading *FDR* by Jean Edward Smith and *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* by Jonathan Alter. These books offer excellent historical perspective and insight into a fascinating man, but will they really offer the guidance a president needs during a time of economic and international turmoil? According to an August 2006 *U.S. News and World Report* article by Kenneth T. Walsh, former President Bush was reportedly a bookworm, and read books such as *Alexander II: The Last Great Tsar* by Edvard Radzinsky, *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero* by David Maraniss, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* by Richard Carwardine and *Salt: A World History* by Mark Kurlansky. It seems difficult to understand how these selections have informed national and international political and economic decisions. It also seems these books would have been of greater value had Bush also read French and Raven's *The Bases of Social Power* or Hall's *The Johari Window* to put some theory in his application. Biographies inform and entertain, but theories educate.

There always seems to be a great cry for leadership, especially now with crumbling markets and organizations. Unfortunately, books that convey a scholarly definition and theory as to what leadership means to society do not often hit the *New York Times Best Seller List*. It seems that after years of developing, researching, and testing a theory, getting it to the forefront of society would be the goal. There could, and should, be some middle ground between academic journals and airport leadership books. What if leadership theorists got together with authors of historical works and created books where leadership theory was interwoven into biographies, creating a platform of theory and application from which the reader could learn and apply?

"There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept," Bass wrote in *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership* (1990, p. 11). I would take one more step to say there are as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have worked to lead. Because of this the understanding of leadership seems no more unified or understood today than before leadership was a serious academic

discipline. It seems leadership academicians need to read some of their own work and to discover how to share a vision with society that would allow for a better understanding of the words leader and leadership.

“Blagojevich’s arrest has thrown Illinois politics into chaos, and many of the state’s political leaders -- and Obama -- have called on the governor to resign,” I read in a recent [cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) online article. With the task ahead of them, I hope the Illinois state officials take the time to understand the many facets of leadership, particularly the essence of Burns’ (1978) *Transforming Leadership*. If so, maybe we will all be lifted to a new level and gain a better understanding of what leadership means to our society. Special issues of journals such as this are an excellent platform to get academics to recognize there can be a gap between ivory-tower theories and the realities of society. We need leadership theories that will take society through the hard times and promise a brighter future. We need the common understanding in society that leadership is a process, not just a word.

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