The Leader-Follower Relationship as a System

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# LEAD500 – Leadership Styles and Theories

February 3, 2013

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# Abstract

Leadership models and theories increasingly explore the relationship between leaders, followers and situational factors. Leaders and followers cannot exist independent of one another. The presence of one is dependent on the existence of the other. To this end, each has a unique role to play. While leaders and followers do maintain distinctive roles, a leadership relationship is based on leader-follower reciprocity thus creating a leadership system within a situational context. Reciprocity is based on expected outcomes of behaviors and actions. Through fulfilling their respective roles, leaders and followers create a feedback loop. This ongoing communication and interaction fuels and drives leader-follower reciprocity. As leaders and followers continue to fulfill their roles and strive towards achieving expected outcomes within the context of their present situation, they create an interconnected system where cause and effect are difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish from one another. To this end, leadership must be examined as a system rather than a sum of individual parts.

The Leader-Follower Relationship as a System

# Modern research and examination of leadership demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of leaders and followers. While leaders and followers play distinctive roles, a leadership relationship is based on leader-follower reciprocity thus creating a leadership system within a situational context. Leaders and followers cannot exist independently of one another. The definition of one necessitates the existence of the other. However, leaders and followers also exist based on mutual expectation of reciprocity. This mutual dependency creates a system also influenced by situational and contextual factors. While leaders and followers exist within a system, they do play distinct parts.

**Distinctive Roles**

As stated earlier, leaders and followers cannot exist independently of one another. If one has no followers, one is not a leader for there is no one to lead. Conversely, if one has no leader then one is not a follower for there is no one to follow. Leaders and followers exist in a relationship and, before beginning discussion on the leader-follower relationship, it is important to consider the distinction of each role. Leaders may emerge from within a group, be appointed or elected and, regardless of their consideration or structure approach, are responsible for moving the group forward towards goal accomplishment (Greene, 1975; Hollander, 1992). In his book *On Becoming a Leader*, Warren Bennis writes, “No leader sets out to be a leader. People set out to live their lives, expressing themselves fully. When that expression is of value, they become leaders” (1994, p.111, para. 5). Edwin Hollander echoes this sentiment in his article, *Leadership, Followership, Self and Others,* stating, “the reality [is] that leaders typically rise from among those who have shown ability in the follower role, and are thereby given a boost” (1992). As I have progressed through my career, I have become more cognizant of my role as both a leader and a follower. Within my organizations, I am aware I fulfill different roles based on the context of the situation. I am also aware the roles of others may shift as the context changes. Fillmore H. Sanford asserts in his article, *The Follower’s Role in Leadership Phenomena*, “The follower is always there when leadership occurs. It is he who accepts or rejects leadership” (1958). With this concept in mind, one recognizes leaders are not inherently more powerful than followers and it is, ultimately, the follower who decides the extent of a leader’s power. Sanford encourages examination of both the leader’s and the follower’s readiness for leadership as influenced by their psychological attributes as “Leadership is a relation. Psychological factors in the follower as well as psychological factors in the leader help determine this relation” (1958). While leaders and followers hold distinctive roles, the relation between these roles is reciprocal in nature.

**Reciprocal Nature**

Leader and follower behaviors and actions influence one another in a reciprocal relationship. In his article, *The Reciprocal Nature of Influence between Leader and Subordinate,* Charles Greene asserts the relationship between leaders and their followers shares mutual influence (1975). Greene states, “The expectation is that the person whose behavior causes another to be positively reinforced will in return be rewarded by the other” (1975). Hollander refers to this social exchange concept as the “idiosyncrasy credit” (IC) model of leadership whereas the ability of a leader to enact change is a direct function of followers’ “perceptions of that leader’s competence and signs of loyalty and trust” (1992). The IC model views leadership as a “dynamic process of interpersonal evaluation in which credits are earned in the eyes of followers” (Hollander, 1992). These credits are what build trust between a leader and a follower and trust is essential as a foundational element to leader-follower reciprocity. As a leader, my most valuable asset is my credibility. I realize although my credibility has been hard won it may be lost by a momentary indiscretion or abuse of trust. Likewise, I give myself over most fully to following those leaders whom I trust and have demonstrated a commitment to a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship. In his article, *Trust in Leadership and Team Performance,* Kurt T. Dirks writes, “trust in leadership allows the team members to suspend their questions, doubts, and personal motives and instead throw themselves into working towards team goals” (2000). When leaders and followers actively engage in a feedback loop based on self-awareness and mutual trust and recognition, they begin to strengthen their relationship as a system.

**Leader-Follower Relationship as a System**

In the past, research into leadership primarily focused on leaders and more recently it began considering followers and the context and needs of the situation. The reciprocal relationship between followers and leaders with consideration given to the situation paves the way to viewing leadership as a system. When viewed as a system, leader-follower relations are inextricably connected and difficult to examine independently of one another. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a biologist and systems theorist, is considered one of the founders of the General Systems Theory (GST) (Hammond, 2003). His inspiration for GST emerged from his belief that this “concept was also relevant in other fields and could be applied to the study of the human psyche, social institutions, and the global ecosphere, where similar laws of organization might apply” (Hammond, 2003, p.105). The General Systems Theory asserts

Each variable in any system interacts with the other variables so thoroughly that cause and effect cannot be separated. A simple variable can be both cause and effect. Reality will not be still.And it cannot be taken apart! You cannot understand a cell, a rat, a brain structure, a family, a culture if you isolate it from its context. Relationship is everything. *(Ferguson, 1980, pp.156-157)*

As individuals examine leadership within a systems architecture, the importance of trust and credibility become even more apparent for the energy within the system may be expended on self-preservation thus limiting the efficiency and productivity of the entire system *or* the same energy, when applied in an environment of trust, may be given over to the entire system thus enhancing efficiency and productivity. Hollander addresses this point of view during his discussion on identification motifs asserting effective leadership relationships exist in a mutual identification motif of two-way influence and effective leadership is accomplished “from within the world of other people”(1992). On the topic of this linkage, Hollander quotes E.H. Erikson stating followers “join a leader and are joined together by him” (1992). Through recognizing the interdependency and connection between the worlds of the follower and the leader, leadership is seen as a system.

**Conclusion**

As research and discussion continue on leadership, a new paradigm has begun to emerge. Leadership is now being discussed in terms of relationships and systems. To understand leadership as a system, one must be familiar with the distinctive roles of followers and leaders yet also understand how those roles interact and overlap. Leaders and followers exist in a reciprocal relationship based on expected outcomes of behavior. As they engage in a leadership relationship, the more leaders and followers actively participate and give attention to feedback the stronger the relationship becomes. Leaders and followers do not exist independently of one another; rather, they exist in a system. While one may be able to differentiate between the different roles of leaders and followers, one cannot divorce the roles from each other completely as they each create a cause and effect upon one another within the overall context of the situation. An efficient and effective leadership system is energized by trust as leaders and followers give themselves over completely to the system creating synergistic efforts towards goal accomplishment.

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