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# Leadership – an overview

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## Leadership: an overview

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**Abstract:** Leadership is as old as human civilization. The field of leadership has burgeoned since its emergence in the last century. Leadership has become a fast-growing topic of interest for both scholars and practitioners from all over the world. On the one hand, leadership is a widespread research area. On the other hand, leadership is one of the oldest practices in human history. The aims of the paper are to define the concept of leadership from a multiple perspective and to present its main characteristics. The paper demonstrates that leadership represents a complex, context-based, multifaceted, dynamic, and even an elusive concept as there is no universal definition of leadership. Also, the paper illustrates some of the main characteristics of leadership by taking into account various perspectives, theories, and paradigms.

**Keywords:** leadership, leadership-as-practice, leader, paradigm, theory

**JEL Classification:** M1, M19

## 1. Introduction

Leadership is as old as human civilization. The early written principles of leadership can be found in the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs for leadership, leader and follower, and Instruction of Ptah-Hotep, followed by the Chinese works of Confucius and Lao-tzu and the classical Greek and Roman writers, such as Plato and Marcus Aurelius (Bass and Bass, 2009). However, the beliefs about the concept of leadership have changed over the time.

The field of leadership has burgeoned since its emergence in the last century. Leadership has become a fast-growing topic of interest for both scholars and practitioners from all over the world. On the one hand, leadership is a widespread research area. In the beginning, the study of leadership was performed mostly from a historical and military perspective (Yukl, 2013). Later, other perspectives on leadership, such as the sociological or psychological ones, were added. Numerous studies already published are dealing with the “never-ending task of identifying identities or practices related to successful leadership” (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010, p.77) as leadership is seen as “a solution for most of the problems of organizations everywhere” (Palestini, 2009, p.1).

On the other hand, leadership is one of the oldest practices in human history. Based on practice, the leadership-as-practice approach recognizes the importance of “everyday activity, performances, and interactions, that is the doings of leadership” (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016, p.31). Leadership-as-practice orients people to “what is internalized, improvised and unselfconscious” (Carroll, et al., 2008, p.374) and is “less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together” (Raelin, 2016b, p.3). Thus, the practice of leadership is intrinsically linked with its context (Raelin, 2016a). In this respect, the business world provides many valuable cases related to the practice of leadership.

The aims of the paper are to define the concept of leadership from a multiple perspective and to present its main characteristics. The structure of the paper is as follows: the second section reviews the literature. The research methodology is illustrated in the third section of the paper. The fourth section presents the results. Paper ends with conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

Without any doubt leadership constitutes one of the most studied topics of our time (Tourish, 2008). As a science, art and practice, leadership has gained the attention of numerous researchers and practitioners worldwide. During the time, leadership has constituted a topic of interest and, therefore, has been studied in several ways from different views and in various contexts (Toma, Gradinaru and Zainea, 2020). As a consequence, the leadership literature has become one of the largest in the business domain.

Leadership represents a challenging but elusive and even enigmatic concept. This is why it has remained a difficult to define concept. Thus, leadership has many definitions and means something different for so many people around the globe. Without an agreed-upon definition, leadership is:

- „a process of facilitating the goal achievement of an individual or of a group in a particular situation” (Keating, 1982, p.16).

- „an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members“ (Bass, 1990, p.19-20).
- „the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations“ (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, p.30).
- „a way of thinking and a way of acting...an attitude, a mind-set“ (Koestenbaum, 2002, p.23).
- „an art, something to be learned over time...is more tribal than scientific, more a weaving of relationships than an amassing of information“ (De Pree, 2004, p.3).
- „concerned with direction-setting, with novelty and is essentially linked to change, movement and persuasion“ (Grint, 2005, p.15).
- „a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal“ (Northouse, 2010, p.3).
- „showing the way and helping or inducing others to pursue it. This entails envisioning a desirable future, promoting a clear purpose or mission, supportive values and intelligent strategies, and empowering and engaging all those concerned“ (Gill, 2011, p.9).
- „strategic, focused on vision, and involves a strong element of building trust and emotional engagement with ‘followers’ “ (Carmichael, et al., 2011, p.2).
- „about giving direction, about guiding others, and about providing solutions to common problems“ (Helms, 2012, p.3).
- „looking beyond the everyday management of people to creating a vision for the collective, developing strategy, inspiring and motivating, and making key decisions“ (Riggio, 2017, p.277).
- „all about getting people to work together to make things happen that might not otherwise occur or to prevent things from happening that would ordinarily take place“ (Rosenbach, Taylor and Youndt, 2018, p.2).
- „an influencing process occurring both directly and indirectly among others within formal employment relations“ (Bratton, 2020, p.16).
- „about achieving influence, not securing compliance“ (Haslam, Reicher and Platow, 2020, p.xvi).

Although that defining leadership represents a rather relatively recent academic endeavour „definitions proliferate, and leadership remains an enigma“ (Fairholm and Fairholm, 2009, p.5) and is full of different paradoxes (Bolden, Witzel and Linacre, 2016). This is the result of the fact that there is no universally agreed definition of the leadership concept as there is “no one-dimensional view of leadership“ (Gosling, et al., 2012, p.xiv).

### 3. Research methodology

In order to attain the objectives of the paper the authors used a research methodology based on collecting, analysing, and synthesizing quantitative information from numerous secondary sources of data through desk research. The authors identified and gathered information

from articles and books found in electronic databases (e.g., SAGE Journals) and at the Central University Library Carol I of Bucharest.

#### 4. Results and discussion

Starting from the definitions above presented within the literature review, several main characteristics of leadership can be revealed. First, there is no universal definition of leadership as there are many approaches to leadership that lead to various understandings of the concept. In other words, leadership is a term that “has come to mean all things to all people” (Rost, 1991, p.7). For example, the leadership-as-practice approach considers leadership as appearing as a practice whereas the trait approach puts accent on the leader. Leadership-as-practice is mainly concerned with “where, how, and why leadership work is being organized and accomplished” (Raelin, 2011, p.196).

Second, some definitions consider leadership as a behaviour (Richards and Engle, 1986) or an interaction between traits (Bogardus, 1934), others as a process (Barker, 2001), influence (MacArthur, 2004), power (Janda, 1960) or an ability (Robbins, 1998). By reviewing the leadership theories Northouse (2013) identified the following four common themes:

1. Leadership constitutes a process.
2. Leadership involves influence.
3. Leadership appears in a group context.
4. Leadership implies goals attainment.

Therefore, the development of leadership theory represents the output of a long and significant effort emerging from a multidisciplinary perspective (Goethals and Sorenson, 2006).

Third, four main leadership paradigms have emerged during the time: classical, transactional, visionary, organic (Table 1). They range from the Classical view on leader’s dominance to the Organic view on de-emphasis on formal leadership.

*Table 1: Leadership paradigms*

Leadership characteristic	Classical	Transactional	Visionary	Organic
Major era	Antiquity- 1970s	1970s- mid-1980s	Mid-1980s- 2000	Beyond 2000
Basis of leadership	Leadership dominance through respect and/or power to command and control.	Interpersonal influence over and consideration of followers. Creating appropriate environments.	Emotion- leader inspires followers.	Mutual sense-making within the group. Leaders may emerge rather than be formally appointed.
Source of follower commitment	Fear or respect of leader. Obtaining rewards or avoiding punishment.	Negotiated rewards, agreements and expectations.	Sharing the vision; leader charisma may be involved; individualized consideration.	Buy in to the group’s shared values and processes; self-determination.
Vision	Leader’s vision is unnecessary for follower compliance.	Vision is not necessary, and may not ever be articulated.	Vision is central. Followers may contribute to leader’s vision.	Vision emerges from the group; vision is a strong cultural element.

Source: Avery, 2004, p.19.

As leadership has to be seen in the context of its period of time it is important to note that a plethora of factors (e.g., economic, political, technological) has had a major impact on its meaning. During its formal academic existence, five principal evolutionary stages have been identified. They range from underlying the personal traits of leaders to emphasizing the way leaders work with and relate to other people (Table 2).

*Table 2: The evolutionary stages of leadership*

No.	Theory	Focus
1	The trait theory: who the leader is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to identify the personal qualities and traits that distinguished leaders from followers</li> </ul>
2	The behavioural approach: what the leader does	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to show how leaders behave in relation to influence their followers</li> </ul>
3	The situational and contingency approaches: where leadership takes place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to emphasize the importance of various variables such as the levels of subordinate competence and confidence in the tasks they were performing</li> </ul>
4	The charismatic-inspirational models- heroic leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to present the charismatic leaders who possess certain personality characteristics and act in ways that result in trust, obedience, identification with them</li> </ul>
5	The post-heroic models of leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to emphasize the ethical behaviours of leaders</li> </ul>

Source: Fairholm and Fairholm, 2009, pp.7-13; Skipton, et al., 2013, pp.17-25.

Fourth, leadership as a human phenomenon occurs at multiple levels as follows: one-to-one relationships, group level, organizational level, etc. (Humphrey, 2014). It means that leadership is contextually defined. For example, organizational leadership involves “processes and proximal outcomes (such as worker commitment) that contribute to the development and achievement of organizational purpose” and is “inherently bounded by system characteristics and dynamics” (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2001, p.6). It implies the examination of three interconnected factors: leader, followers and context (Bratton, 2020- Figure 1). In this respect, a leader is “one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (Winston and Patterson, 2006, p.7). Thus, the role of leader is fundamental in attaining organizational aims. This is why a good leader should possess particular traits such as integrity, charisma, intelligence, honesty, sound reasoning, commitment, etc. (Marinescu, Toma and Saseanu, 2011; Toma and Marinescu, 2013; Saseanu, Toma and Marinescu, 2014; Toma, Marinescu and Constantin, 2016; Toma, et al., 2019). It is said that leadership effectiveness depends upon the following two factors: “1. the extent to which people follow and give legitimacy (this can be termed internal validation), 2. the extent to which the unit or organization succeeds and survives (this may be termed external validation)” (Storey, 2004, p.16). The context refers to external factors, the so-called STEPLE factors (social, technology, economic, political, legal, ecological).

Figure 1: Leadership as an interconnected process



Source: Bratton, 2020, p.5.

Fifth, a set of dualities lies at the heart of research on leadership as follows: “(1) the duality between the leader’s role in producing superior performance or results and the leader’s role in making meaning; (2) the duality between the leader as a special person (with a unique personality and character traits, emphasized by disciplines such as history, psychology and psychoanalysis) and leadership as a social role (defined as an influence relationship between the leader and society, emphasized in fields such as sociology, political science, and economics); (3) the duality between leadership as being universal (there’s something in common that unites leaders across all situations and contexts) and leadership being particular (each person must lead differently depending on his or her own identity and that of the situation); (4) the duality between the leader’s ability to exercise agency (the power, influence, will, and ability to do, to act, to change) and the leader’s need to attend to constraints (such as the organization’s history, myriad demands, and constituencies); and (5) the duality between thinking on leader development in terms that emphasize leader’s capacity for thinking and doing (which puts an emphasis on various competencies) to becoming and being (which puts an emphasis on an evolving identity)” (Nohria and Kurana, 2010, p.7).

Sixth, leadership and management are different concepts in spite of the fact that sometimes they are used interchangeably. Leaders have a vision of what has to be achieved, communicate it to people, inspire and motivate them to attain the goals. Managers have to ensure the needed resources in order to obtain the best results. Leaders align organization whereas managers organize and staff (Kotterman, 2006).

## Conclusions

Since the last century the literature related to the concept of leadership have expanded exponentially. During the time, leadership has become a topic of interest for many researchers and practitioners worldwide.

The paper presents an overview on leadership. It demonstrates that leadership represents a complex, context-based, multifaceted, dynamic, and even an elusive concept as there is no universal definition of leadership. Also, the paper illustrates some of the main characteristics of leadership by taking into account various perspectives, theories, and paradigms. Further researches may identify other characteristics of leadership and deepen the analysis of their interrelationship.

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