Who leads? A contextualized perspective on organizational leadership and learning

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the question of how current understandings of leadership might be situated, characterized, and expressed through study and practice in organizations. The perspective presented in the article asserts a broad base for the possibility of leadership action – it is not restricted ground. My assumption is that although the extensive leadership literature still presents varied understandings of its definition and character, both the function of leadership and its necessity are the focus of some consensus. I propose here a conceptual framework expressed as a contextual model for situating and studying leadership and for designing leadership-focused professional growth activities. My intent is to encourage a broadened conception of leadership and strengthened approaches to preparation for, and development in, that work.

Introduction

The notion of leadership is at once alluring, elusive, and frustrating for scholars and practitioners alike. We have studied much, written much, and asserted much. We believe we recognize leadership when we experience it, yet we do not always agree on what we have seen or on what the term means. We understand intuitively, or at least we believe, that there are capable leaders among us; we sometimes count ourselves among them. We are deeply concerned when there appears to be a lack of leadership in places that are important to us; yet we are sometimes reluctant to grant to others the authority to lead. While our reluctance may be rooted to some degree in ego, it may equally reflect our discomfort with the fact that we lack a clear, precise, widely accepted understanding of the leadership phenomenon.

Issues surrounding the definition, study, and practice of leadership are widely recognized and of long standing. Fullan (2000) has pointed out that leadership has been the focus of “countless articles over the past decade,” a fact that might suggest we have access to a growing body of systematic and reliable knowledge (p. xix). He acknowledges our progress on some fronts, noting that we “have mapped out much of the territory, including broadening the concept of leadership” (2000, p. xix). Yet in regard to the present state of affairs, Fullan (2000) asserts there is “a shortage of qualified leaders at all levels in the educational system” (p. xix). Common conversation suggests both that this situation has not improved substantially in the past fifteen years, and that it is replicated across many organizational settings. It is not uncommon to hear reference to a presumed “crisis of leadership” in our schools, hospitals, churches, or government. Maxcy's assertions, which may relate to that reality, arguably remain current:

It is clear that there has been no long-standing consensus as to what the leadership concept means. . . . We have seen that talk of leadership is conceptually flabby and underdeveloped. The term, ‘leadership’ is used in so many and varied ways that rigor is seriously restricted. . . . Despite the huge literature, no clear-cut generalizations regarding leadership seem to hold. . . . The lack of proper theoretical grounding of the leadership concept has had the result of allowing muddled and contradictory research on leadership to become the norm rather than the exception (Maxcy, 1991, pp. 48-50).

Clarifying an Understanding of Leadership

Wherever we stand in relation to the study or the practice of leadership, clearly we must choose a basis for action. If our primary task is to study leadership, we owe to the field a rigorous examination of the best of what we know now and a systematic effort to broaden and deepen our collective knowledge. If our primary task is to practice leadership in our work and social settings, we owe both to ourselves and to those touched by our actions a scrupulous effort to practice leadership that is both expert and humane. Both of those ventures demand that as we advance this unfinished work, we do so with some notion of who can be identified as "leader" and in what contexts leadership will be practiced.

Typically we have narrowed our conceptions of both the locus and the nature of leadership. In terms of locus, we have often restricted our consideration to those individuals we formally designate as leaders, usually those who occupy senior positions in our organizations. In terms of nature, we have often restricted our designation of
leadership to matters of governance and policy. Hodgkinson, for example, has argued that the "term is commonly associated with administration. Sometimes it is identified with it. . . . administration is leadership and leadership is administration" (1996, p. 30). More recently, Fullan has asserted, "We are forcefully reminded that the notion of leadership must not be confined to those holding formal leadership positions. All leadership, if it is effective, must have a strong component of sharedness (Fullan, 2000, p. xx)."

We also face difficulty in selecting the vocabulary of leadership. Sometimes meanings vary between North American, European, and other settings. Often, though, it seems that the root of the difficulty is more than a matter of usage; we are often bound by notions of role that stand in the way of a robust understanding of the term itself. As an example, Northouse has offered these comments aimed at clarification:

Leadership is a process that is similar to management in many ways. Leadership involves influence, as does management. Leadership requires working with people, which management requires as well. Leadership is concerned with effective goal accomplishment and so is management. . . . But leadership is also different from management. . . . Management is about seeking order and stability; leadership is about seeking adaptive and constructive change. (Northouse, 2001, pp. 8-9)

Perhaps we must separate the notion of what leadership is – its definition – from ideas about where we might locate, or situate, leadership, and about what constitutes the work of leadership. Hodgkinson has stated clearly and helpfully that leadership is "the moving of people towards goals through a system of organization" (1996, pp. 78-79). However, even that seemingly simple definition of leadership – that it is the movement of people around purpose – raises for us a full range of complexities surrounding the act. Therein lies the opportunity: that we direct our efforts to preparing and strengthening leaders in regard to those complexities, recognizing that leadership has a fundamental reason for being – the achievement of purpose through people.

Hodgkinson has made a fundamental and substantial contribution to the study of leadership. In particular, he has impacted the field through his development of value theory and his systematic exploration of the idea that there exists a hierarchy of values that can be understood and audited. He has clarified the idea of praxis, or reflective practice, as a defining element of philosophy-in-action that can inform the study and strengthen the practice of leadership.

Hodgkinson has also contributed to the field by clarifying for those involved in the study and practice of leadership that there are fundamental differences in the work to be done within organizations. In a manner particularly helpful to practitioners, he has distinguished clearly between two primary functions, asserting that:

An important conceptual difference exists between the terms administration and management. . . . by administration we mean those aspects dealing with the more value-laden issues and the human components of organizational life and by management we mean those aspects that are more routine, material, programmatic, and amenable to quantitative methods. (1996, p. 27)

Hodgkinson also acknowledges the persistence of the definitional problem, noting that "The mix of administration-management . . . will naturally vary, in complex and sometimes imponderable ways" (1996, p. 30). He is clear as to the distinction:

Generally then administration is the broad art of determining organizational goals and motivating towards them while management is the ancillary, auxiliary, and subordinate science of specifying and implementing means toward the achievement of the same goals. Administration is ends-oriented, management MEANS-ORIENTED. (1996, p. 28)

That clearly articulated separation of function lends itself readily to further analysis and explanation. However, Hodgkinson has also asserted the synonymous character of two other concepts, implicitly raising the troublesome question of who may lead:
Administration is leadership. Leadership is administration. . . . In short, good leadership entails good administration and bad administration entails bad leadership and leadership is what administration does, either successfully or otherwise. It follows that the philosophy of administration is also and always the philosophy of leadership....To put it differently, both leadership and administration are the moving of people towards goals through a system of organization. This can be done well, or done badly, or done indifferently, but it cannot not be done at all. . . . But for our more technical purposes the terms "administration" and "leadership" merge and become synonymous. (1996, pp. 78-79)

I offer another view of the first two sentences and the last in the quotation above. I propose a broader, more inclusive conception of leadership "for our more technical purposes" that I believe is supportable when held alongside Hodgkinson's text. I differ not at all with his depiction of the practice of administration as constituting leadership, as philosophy-in-action. He has asserted convincingly that "Leadership pervades organizations and is intrinsic to their structure" (1996, p. 30), and that within organizations "No one can escape leadership acts and responsibilities" (1996, p.78). Listing a variety of occupations within an organization, Hodgkinson has observed that "all may have to make
exquisitely difficult value judgments, and all will be making crucial organizational decision, leadership acts” (1996, p. 79).

There is support in the literature for the idea that the capacity for leadership exists, and must be developed throughout our organizations. Commenting on the scene in recent years, Fullan observes that “adaptive solutions must be generated and carried out by scores of committed participants. . . . The scientific study of leadership has never been greater, nor has the recognition that broad-based leadership is the only way forward” (Fullan, 2000, p. xx). Wheatley also supports the idea of a broad, well-populated context for leadership:

But if we are to develop organizations of greater and enduring capacity, we have to turn to the people of our organization. We have to learn how to encourage the creativity and commitment that they wanted to express when they first joined the organization. . . . figure out how to reengage people in the important work of organizing. (2000, p. 345)

In a manner consistent with trends elsewhere in the emerging literature, Wheatley suggests a more widely accessible basis for leadership activity, noting that “Organization occurs from the inside out, as people see what needs to happen, apply their experience and perceptions to the issue, and use their own creativity to invent solutions” (2000, p. 341). Throughout the literature, regardless of definitional specifics, leadership is characterized as activity, as a “doing.” Hodgkinson describes leadership as “an event, not an attribute of personality. It is a description given to a dynamic complex of action. . . . Leadership is the conjunction of technical competence and moral complexity” (1996, p. 85).

Clarifying Contexts: A Conceptual Framework for Study and Practice

If we agree that leadership is an activity, and that its specific character involves the moving of people toward goals through a system of organization, then we open the door to productive discussion around the “doing” of leadership. Who will engage in the practice of leadership? How will we utilize our knowledge to enhance the practice of leadership? What are some organizational contexts for leadership? If leadership is broadly based, are there opportunities for useful intra- and inter-organizational study? How will we assess the quality of leadership? Our questions demand answers; answers based on a solid conception of leadership that is relevant to the organizational life we encounter daily. As a foundation for those answers, I propose a model of leadership that assumes a broad base for leadership, a non-proprietary model that acknowledges the presence, relevance, and value of leadership situated at many points within the full range of organizational activity. For this discussion, I will utilize social services organizations as a general case, primarily identifying schools and school systems as the specific case in point. The article will conclude with a discussion of context-relevant leadership learning (Figure 1).

In our social service organizations (and plausibly, in our business enterprises), we can identify four major activity sets that require the presence and practice of leadership: governance, administration, management, and service delivery. We might describe these as the organizational contexts for leadership. In a manner dependent on the nature of an individual's work, leadership in each of those settings will be characterized by different patterns of activity and by different knowledge and skill set requirements. Fundamentally, though, and regardless of the specific nature of one's activity, the practice of leadership will be concerned with attaining organizational purpose. The study of that venture will be concerned with understanding these four contexts and examining possibilities for the improvement of practice (Figure 1).
The tasks of analysis, learning, and practice outlined here proceed on the basis of several assumptions. The first is that we will endorse the notion of leadership as a shared enterprise in which many can and will engage. That conception is displayed in the format and content of Figure 1. The second assumption is that it will be useful to differentiate among some important contexts for leadership in organizations. Figure 1 identifies four such contexts. The third assumption is that systematic learning is both a key element of leadership activity and one that pervades and surrounds all four contexts. In some instances, context-relevant learning will bring us together for initiatives of common interest. On other occasions our learning about practice will be specific to the nature of our work in governance, administration, management, or service delivery; we will group ourselves accordingly.

The assumptions I have identified highlight the importance of working from a base of strong understanding regarding each of these four leadership contexts. They hint at answers to at least three important questions: Who can lead? Who may lead? Who will lead? A brief discussion of the four contexts follows; I will complete the article by considering implications for organizational learning and professional growth.

**Leadership in Governing Around Purpose**

Organizations exist where people are gathered about purpose. Broadly speaking, our social service organizations exist for the purpose of bettering the human condition. Each has a societal focus; each addresses purposes related to human need and benefit. Our schools and school systems, for example, focus on the educational growth of children, and we expect them to fulfill that mandate.

In many cases, we have selected representatives to act on behalf of those whose interests are to be served. We entrust the work to individuals who will act together in the pursuit of common purpose. Typically we have entrusted the work of schools in our local communities to those whose titles reflect the character of their task—trustees. We may call them by another name, perhaps directors, but we assemble them as corporate boards to work on behalf of education. We offer them little by way of preparation, and we ask them to carry out their work under our close
scrutiny. We rely on them to have a broader vision of the task at hand and to ensure that our schools fulfill the charge we have given. Fundamentally we ask our boards to govern on behalf of those they serve; their work is about purpose.

What then of leadership in governance? The work is unique because of its character – governance occurs in a group setting. Our knowledge of leadership suggests that it will be strengthened as we broaden the base of involvement; governance demands that broadening, and usually mandates its specific nature. The uniqueness of governing leadership lies in its focus on basic purpose and direction – the long view, the big picture. We expect our boards to point our schools toward what is at the horizon and beyond, to set the course for our schools. John Selden, 17th century British jurist, understood that the task of trustees was to seize the rudder, to determine direction. In an often-quoted excerpt from his memoirs, he observed, “They that govern must make the least noise. You see, when they row in a barge . . . he that governs sits quietly at the stern, and scarce is seen to stir” (1689/1885). For boards, the challenge is often to insist that they will govern despite pressure from those who would have them administer or manage. The risk and sometimes the reality is that they will engage in one or both of these activities, each of which is properly assigned to others.

**Leadership in Administering Toward Goals**

In the lexicon of leadership-related terms, administration and management are often contextualized and redefined, sometimes without adequate clarification, to the point that it can be difficult to ensure common understanding. In this article, I will identify the fundamental concern of administration as being about goals, or ends. The primary focus of management, then, is on the means to achieve those ends.

Leadership as administration is closely aligned with leadership as governance. Its essential task is to be clear about the organization's fundamental purposes and about the boundaries of executive action toward ensuring their realization. Beyond that, the administrator is concerned with communicating and accomplishing purpose, charged with engaging others across the organization in understanding, interpreting, and accomplishing the organization's intents. The administrator serves the vital linking function of ensuring voices for those affected by the identification and selection of purpose – voices of suggestion, of critique, of support, and of change.

The risk for the administrator is that s/he may invade governance or meddle in management. In some cases, the nature of organizational reality is that either of these pathologies may become attractive, perhaps almost compelling; therein lies the risk. The challenge for the administrator is to maintain a broad view of how to accomplish purpose, to focus on work around the organization’s reason for being, and to refuse the distraction of shifting his/her main focus to work that is intended primarily for others.

**Leadership in Managing Means**

Frequently management is described as carrying out the executive function, i.e., “I'll have to refer that to management.” We often identify management, or managers, as carrying overall responsibility for the behavior of the organization, and we may have difficulty altering that popular conception. For purposes of this article, though, that is a less-than-useful characterization. In the terms I have used in this discussion, the executive function is properly the primary role of those whose task is to administer. The core function of management is to ensure the means, to provide the tools, and to enable activity toward purpose. Those who govern will determine the destination; those who administer will identify targets and strategies for reaching them, and those who manage will ensure that accomplishment is enabled and supported.

**Leadership in Delivering Services**

Always, leadership is about purpose. Differentiation is possible because we have different roles to fulfill, but those efforts are always directed at achieving purpose. In some important ways, those who deliver service offer us a primary measure of whether organizational purpose is being achieved. In many cases, they are the most public presenters of the organization, seen by many as primary indicators of the extent to which the organization is fulfilling its mandate. Because of their proximity to those being served and their specialized preparation, frequently they are trusted sources of expertise and information.

In the school, the child's teacher is usually a parent's most important primary point of reference. We measure our organizations by the manner in which they deliver on their promises, and we look for tangible indicators that the work is being accomplished. Our organizations, especially when they are large, are often remote and impersonal; the service provider offers a human voice that in many cases offers us all the evidence we expect.
Leadership and Learning: Understanding Applied

In this article, I have asserted that it is reasonable to assume a broad base of involvement in the effort to accomplish purpose. The idea that leadership is about the attainment of organizational purpose through people suggests both role differentiation and shared enterprise. Leadership can be dispersed and can be developed across our organizations rather than guarded and preserved on the basis of role authority; that will have implications for our learning efforts.

There are few “pure” models in human endeavor. Even our best frameworks are simply approximations designed to facilitate our thinking and discussion. Not every activity of a person designated as administrator will be administrative in character; not every action will be explicitly and singularly goal-directed. In fact, nested within each quadrant of Figure 1 we might imagine a mini-version of the full model, and that characterization frees us to assert a broad conception of the leadership function. The emphasis is one not of singularity and rigidity in a context of exclusiveness, but of emphasis and balance as we identify and embrace a more inclusive understanding of leadership.

Who can lead? If that is the question, and if accomplishing purpose through people is the intent, I suggest the answer is “Any of us.” The operative and more relevant question, perhaps, is “How will we lead?” Our answers can encourage us to be increasingly clear about our roles, about how we will fulfill them, and about how we will engage in improving our practice. In other words, our answers can lead us to reflect on our practice, to learn about leadership.

The title of this journal, the International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning, captures precisely the intent of this article – to inform the study and practice of leadership. Several years ago, Maxcy, referencing Senge, asserted that “If the research on leadership reveals anything it tells us that all leadership must involve teaching and learning” (Maxcy, 1991, p. 50). Our focus on leadership can be sharpened through the lens of learning as we consider how we might act together to understand leadership and to strengthen its practice.

We speak often about collaboration and the pursuit of common purpose, yet we usually design our learning efforts to occur in relatively closed contexts. Superintendents gather with superintendents, teachers with teachers, purchasing agents with others similarly engaged. My own recent experience with cohorts of graduate students that have included teachers, principals, nurses, justice workers, and law enforcement personnel, though, suggests that there is richness to be gained from the study of leadership qua leadership. We can benefit from a cross-disciplinary look at what our colleagues in other settings do when they lead.

Leadership, and leadership learning, is about intentionality. We have attended conferences and clinics, and we have read the leadership literature. We will continue to do both, often to our benefit. Intentional leadership, though, will move us beyond those boundaries. First, we will understand that neither the literature nor our structured learning opportunities can be summed to provide us with a prescription for successful leadership action in the myriad of circumstances we will face. Second, we will realize that if the first statement is true, we have no viable alternative to intentionality. As reflective practitioners, we must understand both our context and ourselves, and design the processes of our own engagement with the process of learning. As we define our leadership learning needs and recognize the complexity of context-relevant learning, we will develop as self-directed learners, realizing that “the learner has substantial control over the purposes, the content, the form, and the pace of learning, and furthermore, the learner is the primary judge of when sufficient learning has occurred” (Vail, 1996, p. 58). Intentional learners will understand the necessity of being self-directed in their learning about leadership.

We will understand also that the leadership enterprise has a broad population. "Self-directed" need not imply "solitary." We can acknowledge that as self-directed intentional leader-learners we need not be alone in our efforts, that we can be members of “a community of practice” (Drath & Paulus, 1994, p. 11), or what more recently we have come to call a learning community. In many cases, the fiscal realities of today's organizational life will push us strongly toward both self-directed learning and grassroots development of learning communities.

We have spent much time and effort in organizational studies to define roles and boundaries. Perhaps our work could more profitably emphasize breaking barriers and developing collegial approaches to our learning. I offer for consideration the conception advanced in this article, that leadership is broadly based and that it is legitimately accessible to each of us in the work we do in pursuit of organizational purpose. With that in mind, there is reason also to broaden the base of our leadership learning efforts, to open debate about the character of our activities in ways that will invite others in our organizations to engage with us in the study of leadership.
References


Biography

Vernon Storey is a Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria and a former teacher, school administrator, and superintendent of schools. He is the author of several books, most recently "Learning to teach: Teacher preparation in Victoria, BC, 1903-1963" (2003), and has contributed previously to IEJLL.