

LEADERSHIP THEORY: THE INFANCY OF INTEGRATION?

The question “what is leadership?” has occupied human intellectual inquiry since the beginning of recorded history. Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli attempted to answer. Organizational scholars have struggled with this question for over 100 years. A recent review of leadership scholarship showed 66 separate classifications of leadership behaviors. It is generally believed among leadership scholars that there has been little work to integrate the findings of these distinct areas of leadership research. It was the goal of this study to test that assumption and discover what integration had been done. This is an important inquiry, as leadership theories are valuable to the extent they explain relationships between organizational phenomena, and more integrated leadership theories often have more explanatory power and therefore can guide organizations with more robust recommendations.

Based on a review of 866 articles from 14 years of published leadership research, Jeremy Meuser and Dr. Robert Liden in cooperation with four scholars from other universities, Dr. Jessica Dinh, Dr. William Gardner, Jinyu Hu, and Dr. Robert Lord, found

- The assumption that leadership research is not proceeding in an integrated way is incorrect. In fact, we found substantial integration in recent published leadership research.
 - How leadership functions at the top levels of an organization is one of the most advanced areas of leadership scholarship from the standpoint of integration.
 - Leadership scholarship has moved beyond looking for the “one right way to lead,” and now considers how aspects of the context in which the leader is operating impact the effectiveness of the leader.
 - Charismatic and transformational leadership – forms of leadership commonly discussed in organizations especially at upper levels and often synonymously – are meaningfully different ways of leading with many of their own unique features.
 - Diversity concerns regarding leadership (e.g., woman and minorities as leaders) are also a topic of great interest, suggesting that organizational scholars are responding to this organizational challenge.
 - Leadership research is impacting research in other non-management research areas.
-

Implications of the Results:

Organizations look toward organizational scholars to aid them in solving problems and improving organizational functioning. This study is a step toward finding the most meaningful of the 66 leadership theories – an important step for researchers to provide the highest quality advice to organizational leaders. The question of “how to lead” at the highest organizational

levels, where the decisions are most complex and the implications most serious, is one of the most holistically studied of all leadership theories and phenomena. Other areas that show the most holistic research are participative/shared leadership, leadership for creativity and innovation, and leadership diversity concerns – all important organizational concerns. Leadership research, then, is poised to remain a relevant source of assistance and advice to leaders at all levels of an organization through continued pursuit of rigorous scientifically based answers to complex organizational questions.
