



Beyond Transformational Leadership: A Descriptive Review on the Future of Leadership Theory in Human Resource Development

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Abstract

Purpose: Leadership theory has morphed and diverged through many iterations from Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory of the early 1900s to the array of people-centered theories actively applied today. While change and growth in theory are natural, modern Human Resource Development (HRD) scholars and practitioners are facing a distinct lack of consensus on a dominant modern leadership theory. This descriptive review seeks to determine what current Human Resource Development scholars are looking for in a leadership theory. This analysis may assist in the creation of a more universally accepted leadership theory by discerning what current Human Resource Development scholars prioritize in their work on leadership. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** With the lack of a universally accepted modern leadership theory in mind, this descriptive literature review seeks to determine what current Human Resource Development scholars are looking for in a leadership theory. Three online resource databases were searched for scholarly, peer-reviewed articles pertaining to leadership and Human Resource Development. The literature reviews and conceptual frameworks were analyzed to determine how these scholars define the construct of leadership theory, how they label these theories, and the organizational results from the application of these theories. **Findings:** The following five points describe the commonalities and patterns in the literature: concept ambiguity in the HRD leadership field, a desire for representation, rejection of models relying on economic outcomes or behavioral approaches, acceptance of follower-driven theory, and the confounding effect of power distance on theory acceptance or application. The findings of this paper provide direction toward the creation of a comprehensive, universally accepted HRD leadership theory.

Subject Areas

Human Resource Management

Keywords

HRD, Leadership, Theory

1. Introduction

Leadership theory has morphed and diverged through many iterations from Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory of the early 1900s to the array of people-centered theories actively applied today. While change and growth in theory are common, modern Human Resource Development (HRD) scholars and practitioners are facing a distinct lack of consensus on a modern, widely accepted, and comprehensive leadership theory [1] [2] [3] [4] [5].

Literature reviews and theoretical frameworks are integral components of research articles [6] [7]. Researchers are tasked with combing existing literature and presenting information that best explains their concepts, constructs, and variables. Precision of construct definition strengthens study validity and provides a solid basis for translating the research into practice [8]. Authors of scholarly research journals are expected to present precise definitions in summary [9] [10]. Bernard Bass and Ronald Riggio's [11] book, *Transformational Leadership*, fills nearly 300 pages with a definition and description of the theory. Journal authors, in comparison, often summarize the theory in mere paragraphs if not sentences [2] [5] [12] [13] [14] [15] [16]. The constructs presented by the researcher, while evidence-based, represent the researcher's perception of importance of the topic.

A descriptive literature review method was implemented to analyze the construct of leadership in Human Resource Development. The review revealed thirty-eight leadership theories actively employed or suggested for application in industry. The search delivered this hefty sum of theories despite constraining the results by publication date and keyword. Some articles identified the same leadership theories by name; however, each theory definition was significantly different among the respective authors, as outlined in **Table 1**. Since scholars do not universally accept any single current leadership theory, this paper analyzes the construct definition of leadership theories in recent scholarly journal articles to determine the perceived shortcomings of current theory and perceived components of an ideal theory.

2. Method

2.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this inquiry is to inform the future framework of a comprehensive, universally accepted leadership theory in Human Resource Development.

Research Question 1: Which theories are being discussed in current publications?

Research Question 2: How are current publications defining leadership theory?

Research Question 3: What patterns or commonalities emerge from current publications' definition of leadership theory?

2.2. Limitations

There are several limitations and assumptions to this study. First, literature reviews and conceptual frameworks are used to determine the perception of leadership theory. Perceptions are not inherently equivalent to practice. This research does not assume to explain or measure the practice of leadership theory in industry or precisely define any specific existing leadership theory. Another limitation arises from the recency of the analyzed articles. Selecting articles posted after January 2020 ensures the results are current and relevant but creates other issues. Namely, the articles gleaned from the search provide a relatively small sample and results are vulnerable to history effects [6].

This study assumes a comprehensive and universally accepted leadership theory in HRD is possible and beneficial to practice. Finally, this inquiry assumes that the perceptions collected in the study adequately represent the target population.

2.3. Methodology

A descriptive, integrated literature review was conducted [9] [17]. ProQuest, Academic Search Complete, and The Professional Development Collection databases were searched. The search was limited to scholarly, peer-reviewed journals with full-text online access through the Indiana State University library. Articles published after January 1, 2020, were considered.

The selected ProQuest search required the exact term "leadership" in the title and the exact phrase "Human Resource Development" in the document. Sixteen results populated. After reviewing the abstracts, four articles not relating to leadership in industry (e.g. sport, marriage, education) were eliminated and five articles irrelevant to leadership theory and Human Resource Development were eliminated.

The Academic Search Complete Database search followed the same parameters and netted only three articles. Consequently, the search was expanded to include the exact phrase "human resource" rather than "Human Resource Development." Fifteen articles populated. The abstracts of these 15 were reviewed for relevance. Five articles did not relate to work, one article did not relate to leadership theory and human development, and two articles were not translated into English and could not be analyzed by the researcher.

The same search process was used for the Professional Development Collection Database. The exact phrase "Human Resource Development" delivered no results, so the search was again expanded to "human resource." Three additional journal articles populated.

Details from the literature reviews and theoretical frameworks of the remaining seventeen articles were classified into seven themes: leadership theories mentioned favorably, leadership theories mentioned unfavorably, effective components of leadership theory, ineffective or less effective components of leadership theory, desirable results that can be expected from successful execution of leadership, and possible mediating or moderating variables for leadership (see **Table 1**). Finally, points requiring further clarification were snowballed through backward citation searching and/or further database searches using specific keywords [9].

3. Discussion

This inquiry revealed five points to guide the creation of a comprehensive and universally accepted HRD leadership theory. Theorists addressing these five points will be addressing what current HRD leadership theory scholars represented in this inquiry perceive as the most important aspects of modern theory. These points, discussed below, include concept ambiguity in the HRD leadership field, a desire for representation, rejection of models relying on economic outcomes or behavioral approaches, acceptance of follower-driven theory, and the confounding effect of power distance on theory acceptance or application.

3.1. Concept Ambiguity

Leadership is a complex concept with many constructs that are difficult to operationalize. Not only are researchers in discord regarding a universal leadership theory, but definitions of each existing theory show considerable variations. Specific leadership theories were named and described 38 times in the seventeen reviewed articles. A number of theories appeared more than once. However, these redundancies were in name alone. Transformational Leadership Theory, for example, was mentioned and described eight times. None of these eight descriptions precisely matched the other. The definitions were not erroneous and were well supported by cited sources, but each researcher chose considerably differing aspects and perceptions of the theory in their attempts to create mutual understanding.

Backward citation searching revealed foundational differences in definitions of Transformational Leadership Theory. Addo & Darety-Baah [2] and Qihua, Haihua, & Chengjun [16] directly cited two arguably seminal sources, Bass's [18] [19] *Leadership and Performance beyond Expectations* book and *Leadership: Good, better, best* journal publication. However, Addo & Darety-Baah [2] use another source in the same article that traces not to Bass, but to a 1998 journal article by Feist [20], *A Meta-Analysis of Personality in Scientific and Artistic Creativity*. Other article citation foundations came from a 1968 paper by Weber & Einsensadt [21], *On Charisma and Institution Building*, and a 2001 journal article [22] on people factors in Agile software development. These variations in theoretical foundations may account for some of the variations in literature re-

view discussions.

Confounding the issue of a clear definition of Transformational Leadership Theory is the use of the term “transformational” by multiple theorists over the past four decades. Transformational Leadership Theory, Transformational Style, Transformational Leadership, and Transformational Leadership Style all share similarities but are independent concepts. James Burns [23] introduced transforming leadership in 1978. Bernard Bass [11] [18] [19] worked on his model for approximately two decades. The concept experienced a revival in the 90’s, leading to a wide variety of authors providing their own inputs on the transformational name. This breadth of authors using the same term to define their theories may cause definitional variations.

Some articles in this inquiry indicated their understanding of Transformational Leadership Theory as a type or collection of other theories while others treated Transformational Leadership Theory as a unique and separate theory. For example, Nientied & Toska [15] described Transformational Leaders as having influence but not giving influence to followers and preferred Empowering Leadership. He & Yu [14], on the other hand, described Transformational Leaders and Empowering leaders as a type of strengths-based leader that empowers and supports their followers.

Future theorists will need to combat concept ambiguity, as evidenced here in the articles’ treatment of Transformational Leadership Theory. Mutual understanding of a comprehensive theory will predicate acceptance of the theory.

3.2. Representation

The articles analyzed in this inquiry explored HRD leadership around the globe. Only Itzkovich, Heilburnn, & Aleksic [5] focused on a universal leadership theory rather than theory creation or application in a specific nation. Countries and areas represented in the remaining articles included Ghana, Brazil, Pakistan, Germany, South Africa (x2), China (x4), Indonesia, India, Uganda, Albania, Portugal, and Taiwan area. These articles chose positive and negative components of leadership theory to best inform their respective countries. Several articles further described differences in theory application within the country based on criteria such as gender and socio-economic status. While each article chose and described leadership theories differently, each sought to gain representation for members in their populations. Some articles, Itzkovich, Heilburnn, & Aleksic [5] especially, also sought to model a ‘real’ person rather than an unrealistic ideal. They recognized that leaders cannot maintain theoretical perfection and will often display positive and negative behaviors simultaneously.

The words researchers used to define leadership theory components and outcomes support the perceived importance of representation. These include personal value systems, cultural differences, emotional awareness, self-realization, individualized attention/consideration, positive follower experience, authentic self, empowerment, autonomy, personal identification, dignity, respect, self-awareness,

no discrimination, no disregard for the individual, and mutual influence (see **Table 1**). A common theme of individual importance and representation emerges from the literature; it stands to reason that a comprehensive, universally accepted theory should be comparably inclusive.

A desire for representation is a current issue throughout the HRD field at large. One common goal in the development of Human Resource Development theories such as Critical Human Resource Development (CHRD), National Human Resource Development (NHRD), Global Human Resource Development (GHRD), and Comparative Human Resource Development (CHRD) is to represent groups and individuals excluded from traditional and Strategic Human Resource Development models [24] [25] [26] [27]. A future comprehensive, universally accepted model for HRD leadership, and arguably HRD as a whole, must adequately represent not just the aggregate population, but individuals within the population as well.

3.3. Economic Outcomes and Behavioral Approaches Are Out of Fashion

While HRD leadership theory researchers in this study vary in defining the effective components of HRD leadership theory, they decisively agree on ineffective or less effective components. Descriptors such as reward for performance exchange, financial results as KPI, favoring/focus on financial obligations, focus on legal obligations, strict control mechanisms, surveillance, centralized processes, blame, autocratic style, and monitoring illuminate the perceptions of inferior leadership theory (see **Table 1**). Transactional-type leadership constructs do not appeal to these current researchers. The researchers acknowledge continued Transactional leadership practice in industry by profitable organizations, however, they believe organizational performance would improve through the implementation of a follower-driven model.

3.4. Follower Driven Leadership Theory Is in Fashion

The vast majority of leadership theories selected and described in the journal articles fall under two categories. The first informs the necessary traits of the leader needed to ensure desired organizational and employee outcomes. The second category focuses on passing power to the employees. This transfer of power is achieved through multiple methods, including knowledge-sharing and decision-making authority. While these two categories are quite different in theoretical foundation, the journal article researchers in both categories focused their attention on the benefits to the follower.

A common criticism of a leader trait driven leadership theories such as Transformational, Authentic, Ethical, Charismatic, Benevolent, and Visionary Leadership is that the theories overlook the followers. These theories are believed to establish a powerful ruler, an exaggerated caricature of an organizational superman. The perceptions of the journal article authors in this inquiry, in

contrast, place the followers as the most important benefactors to properly applied leadership theory. The articles measured the merit of leaders through their human skills, largely ignoring technical and conceptual skills. Leaders are charged with influencing follower's sense of dignity, fairness, altruism, trust, support, and well-being (see **Table 1**) rather than simply leaving them in a state of awe.

The second category encourages the sharing of power and flattening of the hierarchy. While the outcomes of organizational performance are acknowledged, the authors focus on the benefits to the followers. Empowerment, job satisfaction, perceived support, psychological well-being, intrinsic motivation, and autonomy (see **Table 1**) hold importance over benefits to the leader or organization. This conceptual focus on followers indicates that a comprehensive, universally accepted HRD leadership theory would also be follower-driven.

3.5. Power Distance Is a Confounding Variable

Concepts relating to Hofstede's cultural dimension of power distance [28] surfaced repeatedly in the reviewed articles, providing a compelling indication that power distance may serve as a framework variable for leadership theory acceptance.

Qihua, Haihua, & Chengjun [16] identified "cultural dimensions" as an important variable in leadership theory application in China. Other articles used power distance-related verbiage such as knowledge sharing, empowerment, flattened hierarchy, mutually agreed upon control, collaboration, participative style, participative decision making, autonomy, shared leadership responsibilities, and shared tasks to describe effective components of a leadership theory (see **Table 1**).

Nientied & Toska [15] and Ouyang, Zhu, & Guo [29] described cultural norms in Albania and China, respectively, that would affect the implementation of certain leadership theories. These cultural norms included the power dynamic between leaders and followers. Some articles described actions that would flatten the hierarchy as Western or European values. Begum & Khan [4] in their article sought to describe a leadership model conducive to Pakistani culture, choosing to maintain current power dynamics. The article most emphatically encouraging flattening of the hierarchy hailed from Germany [12], the country scoring lowest in this study on Hofstede's power distance scale and nearly two-thirds below the highest score [30].

A subsequent search for relevant journal articles revealed four articles using power distance as a variable in leadership theory research. Luo, Li, Choi, & Du [31] and Yang, Liu, & Gu [32] studied power distance as a moderator for Visionary Leadership effectiveness and specific Servant Leadership outcomes, respectively. Pei-Li [33] selected power distance as a moderating variable and supportive leadership as a mediating variable in their study. Wang & Guan [34] studied the moderating role of power distance on Authoritarian Leadership and employee performance.

Table 1. HRD leadership theory discussion in current literature.

Article Authors	Leadership Theories Discussed Favorably (F) Unfavorably (U)	Effective Components of Theory	Ineffective/ Less Effective Components of Theory	Desirable Results	Mediating/ Moderating Variables
Addo & Darety-Baah, 2020 [2]	Transformational (F) Transactional (U) Passive (U)	follower involvement development Social Relationships personal value systems concern for people idealized influence value employee contribution knowledge sharing coaching mentoring monitoring inspiration charisma	parochial interests reward/ performance exchange	organizational performance culture definition morality motivation perceived support trust perceived care safe and healthy behavior policy compliance knowledge sharing	n/a
Armani, Petrini, & Santos, 2020 [3]	Sustainable (F)	value human development the environment meet needs personal values organizational values ethics morals balance leader development responsibility for well-being of others cultural differences collaborative vision constant learning systems thinking interpersonal skills emotional awareness achievement & affiliation & power change agents focus on sustainability	financial obligations legal obligations financial results as KPI	solve social and environmental challenges develop communities create value strategy alignment change long-term survival and growth culture definition policy adoption shared values ethical behavior enhanced stakeholder relationships social legitimacy trust	n/a
Begum & Khan, 2020 [4]	Pakistan centered model (F) existing foreign models (U)	Persuasion Inspiration implementing change decision making communication skills interpersonal relations problem solving vigilance	insufficient/ irrelevant to Pakistan	sense of belonging and interdependency strategic human development organizational performance growth and change satisfied employees stakeholder co-ordination enthusiasm	n/a
Gierlich-Joas, Hess, & Rahild, 2020 [12]	Digital (F) Transformational (F) E-Leadership (F) Shared (F) Autocratic (U)	combination of human and technical skills data for transparency data for empowerment influence employee relations management coordinating tasks information processing collaboration flattening the hierarchy objectivity upward and downward transparency consent-based transparency participation self-realization individualized attention knowledge sharing long-term orientation shared organizational values mutually agreed upon control systems employee-centric participative style privacy protection influence	Hierarchy Surveillance centralized processes strict control mechanisms blame	organizational performance strategic alignment transparency and efficiency agility employee motivation empowerment learning trust accountability appropriate compensation (intrinsic and extrinsic) self-organized responsible job satisfaction	Agency Theory Control Theory

Continued

Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021[13]	Transformational (F)	Selflessness collective purpose communication vision/mission goal driven empowerment consideration for follower social skills management skills empathy individualized consideration confidence friendliness helpfulness fair decision making concern support role model leaders encouraging development participative decision making creativity accept challenges	n/a	employee performance positive follower attitude organizational success job satisfaction citizenship creativity organizational commitment perceived support trust respect shared sense of purpose	emotional intelligence
He & Yu, 2020 [14]	Strengths-Based (F) Transformational (F) Entrepreneurial (F) Ethical (F) Benevolent (F) Humorous (F) Empowering (F)	leveraging strengths encouraging innovation long-term thinking ability enhancing opportunity enhancing support self-evaluations analysis and feedback	n/a	Innovation organizational efficiency organizational productivity organizational success positive follower experience psychological well-being (happiness, adaptation, self- actualization) satisfaction with competence intrinsic motivation authentic self	n/a
Ilyana & Sholihin, 2021 [35]	Empowering (F) Directive (U)	frequent interaction influence EI autonomy appreciation flexible work environment encouragement support resources challenges valuing employees	Directive Approach is insufficient stringent rules for behavior monitoring progress	Creativity adaptation/ change motivation organizational performance	Expectancy Theory Organizational Equilibrium Theory
Itzkovich, Heilburnn, & Aleksic, 2020 [5]	Complete Full Range of Leadership (F) Full Range Leadership Theory (U) Transformational (U) Transactional (U) Laissez-Faire (U)	individualized consideration intellectual stimulation idealized influence inspirational motivation role model leader empowerment delegation leaders may display constructive and destructive behavior, real, complex people	other theories lack models for destructive leadership, negative styles and behaviors exchange of reward for compliance	personal development independent thinking creative thinking common vision trust/respect in leader motivation destructive behaviors have negative effects	n/a
Nair, Prasad, & Nair, 2021 [36]	Authentic Leadership (F) Ethical Leadership (F)	leader self-awareness leader self-acceptance Leader personal insight positivist approach leader experiences (triggers) confident hopeful optimistic resilient transparent moral/ethical future-oriented integrity authenticity self-awareness self-regulation self-development balanced processing of info illumination passion	n/a	authentic followership positive emotions satisfaction personal identification trust performance organizational citizenship well-being	LMX Theory

Continued

Nangoli <i>et al.</i> , 2020 [37]	n/a	perceived leadership integrity adaptation/ change derive satisfaction from honest actions	n/a	organizational commitment organizational success job satisfaction job performance	Maslow Hierarchy of Needs
Nientied & Toska, 2021 [15]	Self-Leadership (F) Empowering (F) Transactional (F) Transformational (F)	flexible decision making flattened hierarchy self-management entrepreneurial style empower followers autonomy self-regulation support strategic development	should <i>give</i> influence rather than <i>have</i> influence	flexible organization autonomy self-leadership employee satisfaction motivation creativity performance	n/a
Ouyang, Zhu, & Guo, 2020 [29]	Empowering (F) Top-Down Management (U)	value, recognize, trust employees employee power and control of work flattening hierarchy emphasize autonomy reduce institutional constraints interpersonal relationships recognizing individual differences	low enthusiasm	Retention enhanced professional identity job satisfaction employee sense of control employee confidence positive psychological state	n/a
Qihua, Haihua, & Chengjun 2020 [16]	Transformational (F) Transactional (U)	intellectual stimulation inspirational motivation idealized influence individualized consideration	reward for exchange bad mood prohibitive voice	employee mood employee voice	cultural dimensions
Qui, Dooley, Deng, & Li, 2020 [38]	Ethical (F)	communication reinforcement decision making ethical beliefs and values fairness dignity respect role models zero tolerance ethics policy	n/a	voluntary commitment organizational citizenship work performance fairness dignity respect justice culture	n/a
Sepeng, Stander, Van Der Vaart, & Coxen, 2020 [39]	Authentic (F)	value based transparent supportive role model genuine steadfast motivating self-awareness positive self- development	n/a	org citizenship retention intention quality service optimism resiliency self-efficacy going beyond duties innovation altruism	Psychological Capital
Simões, Duarte, & Nunes, 2020 [40]	Ethical (F)	zero tolerance ethics policy ethical vigilance corporate social responsibility formal code of ethics normative framework value for all human and non-human stakeholders mitigating negative operations impacts role model behavior	favoring economic outcomes	no discrimination no disregard for individual no favoring those in power	n/a
Vandavasi, McConville, Uen, & Yepuru, 2020 [41]	Shared (F)	share leadership responsibilities share tasks knowledge sharing mutual influence knowledge management	n/a	effective teams innovation retention production creativity reputations	Social Network Theory Social Exchange Theory

Based on extensive descriptions of power distance-related concepts and the inclusion of power distance in conceptual frameworks of several existing leadership theories, the research supports exploring the role of power distance in HRD leadership theory modeling. This cultural dimension appears to drive the definition and discussions of leadership theory to a greater extent than other possible confounding variables.

4. Summary

The value of this review lies in identifying important aspects of current scholars' perceptions of HRD leadership theory. These perceptions were gleaned through a descriptive literature review. The following five points describe the commonalities and patterns in the literature: concept ambiguity in the HRD leadership field, a desire for representation, rejection of models relying on economic outcomes or behavioral approaches, acceptance of follower-driven theory, and the confounding effect of power distance on theory acceptance or application. Each of these points provides suggestions for further study toward the creation of a comprehensive, universally accepted HRD leadership theory.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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