The Challenges of Leadership in the Modern World

Introduction to the Special Issue

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This article surveys contemporary trends in leadership theory as well as its current status and the social context that has shaped the contours of leadership studies. Emphasis is placed on the urgent need for collaboration among social-neuro-cognitive scientists in order to achieve an integrated theory, and the author points to promising leads for accomplishing this. He also asserts that the 4 major threats to world stability are a nuclear/biological catastrophe, a world-wide pandemic, tribalism, and the leadership of human institutions. Without exemplary leadership, solving the problems stemming from the first 3 threats will be impossible.

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In the best of times, we tend to forget how urgent the study of leadership is. But leadership always matters, and it has never mattered more than it does now. If the United States presidential election of 2004 taught us anything, it was that half the nation has a radically different notion of leadership than the other half. It is almost a cliché of the leadership literature that a single definition of leadership is lacking. But how likely is it that a consensus will be reached on something as straightforward as how to define leadership when, less than two years ago, it became clear that half the electorate saw its candidate as the embodiment of a strong leader while close to the same number saw him as poorly qualified at best, and dangerous at worst? Why allude to current political leadership in an academic journal? Because leadership is never purely academic. It is not a matter such as, say, string theory that can be contemplated from afar with the dispassion that we reserve for things with little obvious impact on our daily lives. Leadership affects the quality of our lives as much as our in-laws or our blood pressure. In bad times, which have been plentiful over the millennia, twisted leaders have been the leading cause of death, more virulent than plague. Even in relatively tranquil times, national leaders determine whether we struggle through our final years, whether our drugs are safe, and whether our courts protect the rights of minorities and the powerless. Our national leaders can send our children into battle and determine whether our grandchildren live in a world in which, somewhere, tigers still stalk their prey and glaciers are more than a memory. Corporate leaders have almost as much power to shape our lives, for good or ill. The corrupt executives at Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco—plus the other "usual suspects"—were not mere symbols of corporate greed and malfeasance. Bad leadership at Enron alone impoverished thousands of employees, stealing their livelihoods, gutting their retirement accounts, and tearing them apart with stress. (I was informed recently that the total dollar cost to investors and pensioners was over $80 billion.) There are, no doubt, people who took their own lives because of what was done at Enron by its lavishly compensated bad leaders.

It is easy to forget this context when one is describing leadership in the cool, clear, invaluable language of academic discourse. As students of leadership, it is important for us to distinguish between what we can and cannot say with authority on the subject—that is the essential first step in developing a grand unifying theory of leadership. But we must remember that the subject is vast, amorphous, slippery, and, above all, desperately important. As Robert Sternberg (2007, this issue) points out in his discussion of cognitive-systems models of leadership, creativity is an essential characteristic of leaders. As leaders, those in the forefront of the analysis of leadership must make creative choices about what aspects of this sweeping subject to study. Even as we examine those aspects that are amenable to the methodologies now at hand, some analysts must be willing to look at leadership in all its complexity, which may mean looking at elements that cannot be nailed down in the laboratory. Psychologists should do so if only to identify those aspects of leadership that seem most pressing and most overlooked and those that hold out promise for changing for the better the way leadership is studied and practiced. We have to use our creativity to identify and reframe the truly important questions.

In the bad old days, leadership was taught mainly by means of the biographies of great men. I predict that one quality of a genuine discipline of leadership studies—once such an animal exists—will be its inclusiveness. No matter how many mathematical models the discipline produces, it should always have room for inspirational stories about wonderful leaders as well as grim cautionary tales about bad ones. At least since Joan of Arc miraculously recruited French soldiers to follow her into battle, people have submitted to the will of outsized, charismatic leaders. Al-

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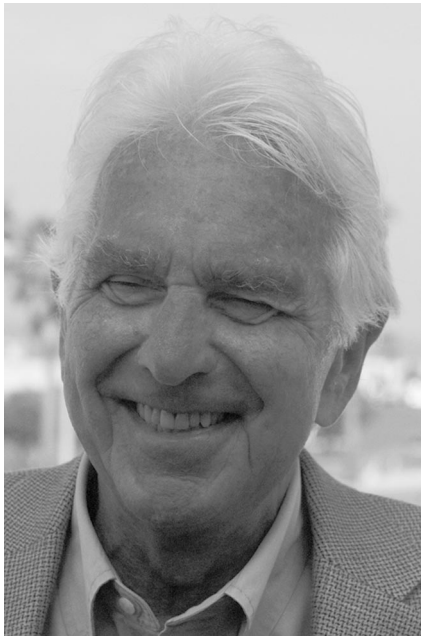

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though heroic leaders may have commanded a disproportionate amount of people's attention in the past, psychology still does not know enough about how they develop and how they recruit and maintain their avid followers. Heroic or charismatic leadership is still an essential, unsolved part of the puzzle. I was recently reminded of this by David Gergen, a frequent advisor to U.S. presidents and an astute student of leadership. He tells how, in December 1931, while on a visit to New York, a middle-aged Briton was struck by a car while crossing Fifth Avenue. Badly hurt, but not so badly that he didn't send the British press his own account of the accident, the English visitor left the hospital as soon as possible to recuperate at the Waldorf Astoria. Now try to imagine what World War II would have been like without the galvanizing rhetoric of the leader almost done in by a New York driver—the visitor was, of course, Winston Churchill. Or imagine how different the United States, and indeed the world, would be today if, in Miami in 1933, Guiseppe Zangora had not fatally shot Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak instead of killing his intended victim, President-Elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt. No wonder people have tried to understand leadership by attempting a kind of reverse engineering of outstanding public figures. To this day, psychologists have not sorted out which traits define leaders or whether leadership exists outside of specific situations, and yet we know with absolute certainty that a handful of people have changed millions of lives and reshaped the world.

One healthy development in the recent study of leadership is a new appreciation for the lessons taught by bad leadership. Barbara Kellerman, research director at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and Jean Lipman-Blumen, professor at Claremont Graduate University's School of Management, have both recently taken on the daunting task of analyzing what makes bad leaders tick. Kellerman's (2004) *Bad Leadership* distinguishes between incompetent leaders and corrupt ones, for example, a valuable reminder that there are many ways for leaders to fail. And in Lipman-Blumen's (2006) book, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, she reminds us that, most of the time, we choose our bad leaders, they do not kidnap us. She argues that the main reason we are attracted to bad leaders is that they soothe our fears—surely a hypothesis worthy of further study in the laboratory. And both authors raise the important issue of the havoc that can be wreaked by effective leaders with a perverse agenda.

As these writers suggest, leadership is always, in some sense, a matter of values. In talking about leadership, we must ask ourselves, "Leadership for what?" Every leader has an agenda, and analysis of that aim, that intent, often fits uneasily with the objectivity that psychologists rightfully strive for in scholarly research. Sternberg (2007, this issue) describes a relatively small group of leaders who are characterized by wisdom, which includes an awareness of "the common good." Such terms are too rare in the leadership literature, as is the word "justice." One of the greatest challenges for students of leadership is to find an academically respectable way to deal with the value-laden nature of the subject. No matter how much psychologists might like to avoid grappling with the values issue, we ultimately cannot. Values are part of the very fabric of the phenomenon. How we confront this without compromising our commitment to objectivity is another of our creative challenges. Perhaps we will have to invent new scholarly forms, new formats that allow us to be both expansive and rigorous. One question begging to be answered by scholars is how the simple invocation of the term "values" can attract or repel followers, as it did in the last presidential election.

As Bruce Avolio (2007, this issue) and others importantly point out in this special issue, psychologists still tend to see leadership as an individual phenomenon. But, in fact, the only person who practices leadership alone in a room is the psychotic. When speaking on the subject, I often show a slide that includes dozens of names, from Sitting Bull and Susan B. Anthony to Kofi Annan and Carly Fiorina, and I ask the audience what these leaders have in common. In fact, the single commonality among these men and women is that all of them have or had willing followers. If we have learned anything in the decades psychologists have now devoted to the study of leadership, it is that leaders do not exist in a vacuum. Shakespeare, perhaps the greatest of all students of leadership, debunked the so-called "great man" theory of leadership before it was even articulated. In *Henry IV*, Part I, Glendower boasts to Hotspur, "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." And Hotspur shoots back, "Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call them?" Any person can aspire to lead. But leadership exists only with the consensus of followers. As the late psychologist Alex Bavelas frequently reminded his students at MIT, "You can't tickle yourself." Leadership is grounded in a relationship. In its simplest form, it is a tripod—a leader or leaders, followers, and the common

goal they want to achieve. None of those three elements can survive without the others.

Given the enormous surge in interest in leadership following the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, I am hopeful that psychology is on the verge of making great strides in leadership studies. I do not know that we will ever have an all-encompassing theory of leadership any more than we have a genuine theory of medicine. But I do think forces are converging—a sense of urgency, a critical mass of committed scholars with highly developed skills—for the field to make a great evolutionary leap. In their contributions, all of the authors in this issue note the breakthroughs in leadership studies in the mid-20th century, when the subject was reimagined and a whole new way of thinking about it emerged. During that fertile period, the charismatic leader was deemphasized, as was trait-based leadership. The emphasis shifted to followers, groups, and systems. Those changes were brought about both by political leaders and intellectual leaders trying to make sense of the horror that a series of horrifically bad leaders had wrought. One of the leaders of that new way of looking at leading was the great Kurt Lewin, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, grateful almost to the point of giddiness to be in the democratic United States, who realized that the best minds to have survived in his generation needed to address the most urgent social problems. In 1936, at the meeting of the American Psychological Association at Dartmouth College, he founded the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues to apply the tools of psychology to such terrible conundrums as the rise of fascism, racial injustice, and other societal problems. The groundbreaking work of Solomon Asch, Muzafir Sherif, Irving Janis and, later, Stanley Milgram on peer pressure surely follows in spirit the path that Lewin and other public-minded scholars helped create. This new zeitgeist was informed by a hunger to understand why the world had gone mad, and it was led by scholars who felt empowered by such new tools as systems theory and a willingness to collaborate across traditional disciplinary lines.

Although we do not yet know what a theory of leadership would look like, we do know it will be interdisciplinary, a collaboration among cognitive scientists, social psychologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, biologists, ethicists, political scientists, historians, sociobiologists, and others. Before we can achieve a comprehensive theory, we need to fill the gaps in our knowledge. We desperately need, for instance, longitudinal studies of both leaders and followers.

The study of leadership will be increasingly collaborative because it is precisely the kind of complex problem—like the genome—that can only be solved by many fine minds working together. (Leadership itself is likely to become increasingly collaborative. We already have a few examples in the corporate world of successful power sharing—the triumvirate at the top of the search engine Google is a good example. And other shared-power models will surely develop as the most creative organizations deal with the issue of leading groups in which the ostensible leader is neither more gifted nor less gifted than the led.)

Among the existing disciplines that must contribute if modern leadership is to be understood are those related to communication. One aspect of leadership that is routinely overlooked is the extent to which it is a performance art. Because leaders must have a vision that they are able to convey and share with their followers, rhetoric is part of the equation. Although President George W. Bush is not universally admired for his spoken presentation of self, he is occasionally masterful in this regard. When crafting the memorable address he gave to Congress following 9/11, for example, he eliminated from preliminary drafts all quotable lines from the towering leaders of history, including Churchill. The president's apparent reasoning was flawless: If powerful language stuck in the memory of listeners, he wanted to make sure it was his. Perhaps because the idea offends our somewhat puritanical notions of authenticity, we tend to forget that leadership often involves acting as if one were a leader. It was Churchill who uttered during the darkest days of World War II that though he was not a lion, he would have to learn to roar like one. Centuries before, Queen Elizabeth I, who was a master of performance, once remarked, "We princes are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world." So those who understand the dramatic arts should be among our collaborators in the search for the nature of leadership.

The other experts who must be part of the collaboration are students of media and communication. Today public leaders rarely, if ever, interact with their followers directly. They are always filtered through the media. Those media are growing in number and constantly changing, and people who understand how these new media work and shape the perceptions of followers are essential to plumbing the field. Is a leader whose message is accessed on a Blackberry different in kind from one whose message is read in the pages of the *New York Times*? Is a politician's vision described in the news pages perceived differently from the same vision presented on the op-ed page? Do viewers of the *Daily Show* have a different relationship to the political candidates they favor than listeners to public radio or talk radio? Does the stature of an interviewer change the perception of the candidate? If Matthew Brady helped create our heroic notion of Lincoln, what role do today's news photographers play in our choice of leaders? Recently, I have been thinking about the role that costume plays in our perception of public figures. What message does a trimly cut jacket simultaneously suggestive of Eisenhower and *Star Wars'* Han Solo send? Can a candidate ever rise above the message of foolishness projected by a pair of floral, knee-length swim trunks? And do young followers, inundated with more visual images than any generation in history, react differently to visual imagery than those of us who have spent only half our lives with television? In his essay in this special issue, Sternberg (2007, this issue) insightfully discusses the importance of stories in leadership effectiveness. The modern media are a key element in the creation and distribution of those stories, and to understand modern leadership we must have a much deeper understanding of those media, in all their power and with all their biases. We must also think more and more

about leadership in the context of globalization and instant communication. The world has so shrunk because of the new media that dissidents can now climb electronically over the walls imposed on them by repressive regimes. And yet while we have instant global communication, we have no guarantee of understanding. It is safe to assume that leadership and followership, like cuisine, have distinctive flavors from one culture to another. Psychologists have to begin to master those different ways of perceiving leadership.

After studying leadership for six decades, I am struck by how small is the body of knowledge of which I am sure. I do believe that leaders develop by a process we do not fully understand, from a crucible experience—a rich trauma like Sidney Rittenberg's 16 years in Chinese prisons—that somehow educates and empowers the individual. I believe adaptive capacity or resilience is the single most important quality in a leader, or in anyone else for that matter who hopes to lead a healthy, meaningful life. Rittenberg is a perfect example. Now in his 80s, he emerged from prison not embittered, but more convinced than ever of the need for the United States, including American enterprise, to collaborate with modern China. And I believe all exemplary leaders have six competencies: They create a sense of mission, they motivate others to join them on that mission, they create an adaptive social architecture for their followers, they generate trust and optimism, they develop other leaders, and they get results.

After reading the contributions of the five leadership scholars in this issue and rereading them a few more times, and then having the time to reflect on them, I am convinced more than ever of two things: The first is that we are learning more and more every day about this most important and urgent subject. The second is my heartfelt conviction that the four most important threats facing the world today are: (a) a nuclear or biological catastrophe, whether deliberate or accidental; (b) a world-wide epidemic; (c) tribalism and its cruel offspring, assimilation (all three of these are more likely than they were a decade ago); and finally, (d) the leadership of our human institutions. Without exemplary leadership, solving the first three problems will be impossible. With it, we will have a better chance. The noble hope of advancing the empirical and theoretical foundation of leadership—after all, we are all Pelagians at heart—could influence the course of leadership and, eventually, the quality and health of our lives.

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