

The ties that lead: A social network approach to leadership

Prasad Balkundi^{a,*}, Martin Kilduff^{b,1}

^a *Department of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources, 274 Jacobs Management Center, University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14260, United States*

^b *Department of Management and Organizations, Smeal College of Business, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, United States*

Abstract

This article investigates, for leadership research, the implications of new directions in social network theory that emphasize networks as both cognitive structures in the minds of organizational members and opportunity structures that facilitate and constrain action. We introduce the four core ideas at the heart of the network research program: the importance of relations, actors' embeddedness, the social utility of connections, and the structural patterning of social life. Then we present a theoretical model of how network cognitions in the minds of leaders affect three types of networks: the direct ties surrounding leaders, the pattern of direct and indirect ties within which leaders are embedded in the whole organization and the interorganizational linkages formed by leaders as representatives of organizations. We suggest that these patterns of ties can contribute to leader effectiveness. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social networks; Leaders; Centrality

Good administrators sometimes fail to understand social structure, and fail to anticipate its consequences for organizational survival. This can leave organizations vulnerable to manipulation by skilled political entrepreneurs. In one example, the entire top management team of a manufacturing company learned from a network analysis that the bomb threats, shootings, and vandalism threatening the future of the company were instigated by partisans of a lower-ranking manager, who had had systematically recruited family, friends and neighbors into the company over a 30-year period. In a district desperate for jobs, these partisans felt loyalty to the informal leader who had provided them information that allowed them to be first in line for vacancies on Monday morning. The CEO, confronted with an analysis of the deep cleavages existing in the social structure of the organization resulting from the informal patterns of recruiting over decades, had this to say about those who had been hired: "... they just seemed like waves of turtles coming over the hill; hired as they made it to our door" (Burt, 1992: 1).

This story illustrates the gap at the heart of our understanding of leadership. It illustrates how important it is for would-be leaders (who may or may not hold formal supervisory positions — see Bedeian and Hunt, in press) to accurately perceive the network relations that connect people, and to actively manage these network relations. This story also illustrates how informal leaders who may lack formal authority can emerge to frustrate organizational functioning through the manipulation of network structures and the exercise of social influence. The perception of and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 716 645 3250.

E-mail addresses: balkundi@buffalo.edu (P. Balkundi), mkilduff@psu.edu (M. Kilduff).

¹ Tel.: +1 814 865 1789.

the management of social networks are intrinsic to the leadership role as we define it in this article, but reviews of the social network literature frequently point out that “little empirical work has been done on leadership and social networks” (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004, p. 800). Our goal is to investigate, for leadership research, the implications of new directions in network theory that emphasize networks as both cognitive structures in the minds of organizational members and opportunity structures that facilitate and constrain action.

In making the link from social networks to leadership, we borrow freely from the entire corpus of social network theory (see Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, for a recent review) and from two perspectives in recent leadership theory: the cognitive revolution in leadership research (Lord & Emrich, 2001) and the theoretical and empirical work that seeks to extend the leader–member exchange (LMX) perspective (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, *in press*; Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000). The cognitive approach to leadership draws attention to the fundamental importance of cognitive structures, such as schemas, in shaping leadership attitudes and behaviors, whereas the LMX approach draws attention to the importance of relations, particularly the dyadic link between a formally designated managerial leader and either a subordinate or, more rarely, a higher-level leader (see Graen & Scandura, 1987, for a review). We build a model that emphasizes, from a network perspective, how the cognitions in the mind of the individual influence the network relationships negotiated by the individual, and how this individual network affects leadership effectiveness both directly and through informal networks, both within organizations and across organizations. Thus, we link together social cognitions and social structure to forge a distinctive network approach to leadership that builds upon, but extends, previous work in both the network and the leadership realms.

1. Organizational network research core ideas

The organizational network perspective is a broad-based research program that continually draws inspiration from a set of distinctive ideas to investigate new empirical phenomena. The “hard-core” ideas at the heart of network research define its special character and distinguish it from rival research programs (cf. Lakatos, 1970). What are these ideas familiar to all organizational network researchers? At least four interrelated principles generate network theories and hypotheses: the importance of relations between organizational actors, actors’ embeddedness in social fields, the social utility of network connections, and the structural patterning of social life (Kilduff, Tsai, & Hanke, 2005).

An emphasis on *relations between actors* is the most important distinguishing feature of the network research program. As a recent historical treatment of social network research (Freeman, 2004, p. 16) pointed out, a core belief underlying modern social network analysis is the importance of understanding the interactions between actors (rather than a focus exclusively on the attributes of actors). An early treatment of network research on organizations stated that “the social network approach views organizations in society as a system of objects (e.g., people, groups, organizations) joined by a variety of relationships” (Tichy, Tushman, & Fombrum, 1979: 507), whereas a more recent survey represented organizational network research as a movement “away from individualist, essentialist and atomistic explanations toward more relational, contextual and systemic understandings” (Borgatti & Foster, 2003: 991). The importance of understanding relationships as constitutive of human nature was stated as follows in a recent book: “Human beings are by their very nature gregarious creatures, for whom relationships are defining elements of their identities and creativeness. The study of such relationships is therefore the study of human nature itself” (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003: 131). Our network approach locates leadership not in the attributes of individuals but in the relationships connecting individuals.

The second principle that gives organizational network research its distinctiveness as a research program is the emphasis on *embeddedness*. For organizational network researchers, human behavior is seen as embedded in networks of interpersonal relationships (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996). People in organizations and as representatives of organizations tend to enter exchange relationships, not with complete strangers, but with family, friends, or acquaintances. Embeddedness at the system level can refer to a preference for interacting with those within the community rather than those outside the community. We emphasize that people’s perceptions of others as leaders are reflected through the sets of embedded ties within which people are located.

The third driving principle of social network research is the belief that network connections constitute *social capital* that provides value-including economic returns (Burt, 2000). As a previous review of network research on leadership pointed out, “Social capital is at the heart of social network analysis” (Brass & Krackhardt, 1999: 180).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10439616>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10439616>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)