



Followership, leadership and social influence



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ABSTRACT

Traditional research in leadership has largely relegated followers to the role of passive recipients or, at best, moderators of leader influence and behaviors. However, recent work in the area of followership has begun shifting this focus and emphasizing the possibility that followers actively have an influence over leaders, in particular leader behavior. This paper revisits traditional areas of the leadership literature and builds on the emerging followership literature to reintroduce followers as part of the social context of leaders. In an attempt to build theoretical rationales for how followers influence leader behavior we draw on the social influence (e.g., Social Impact Theory, Latane, 1981) and the power literature to suggest individual (e.g., strength and immediacy of followers) and group level (e.g., number of followers and unity of the group) characteristics that influence leader behaviors as a function of a leader's informational and effect dependence on followers.

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1. Introduction

Leaders are traditionally treated as heroes or villains depending on how well their organization performs. They get credit for its successes and blamed for its failures (Kelley, 1988; Meindl, 1995). This focus on leaders as drivers of organizational performance has resulted in a long tradition of leader-centered leadership research that emphasizes leader traits (e.g., Fairhurst, 2007) and behaviors (e.g., Likert, 1961; Stogdill & Coons, 1957) as antecedents to leadership processes and outcomes (Meindl, 1995). As an unintended consequence of this emphasis, the impact of followers on leaders (also called a followership perspective, Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Shamir, 2007) has been largely ignored. Followers have instead been relegated to the role of passive recipients or, at best, moderators of leader influence and behaviors (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Shamir, 2007). However, this was not always the case. Early in the leadership literature, researchers understood that leaders are not isolated actors immune from the influence of their followers (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; House, 1971; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). As such, this paper will revisit traditional areas of the leadership literature and build on the emerging followership literature to reintroduce followers as an integral part of leadership. To help develop new theory in this area, as well as to contextualize followership within earlier, seminal leadership theories this paper will begin with a brief overview of the early leader-centered focus of leadership and its treatment of followers and then “reverse the lenses” (Shamir, 2007) to examine how followership research assigns followers to a more active role. Next, we will integrate a major theory of social influence (i.e., Social Impact Theory or “SIT”: Latane, 1981) to suggest a new perspective on power, influence and dependence in leadership by framing followers as important sources of social influence on leaders.

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2. Followers in leadership research

Historically, leadership research has concentrated on leader personality, behaviors, attitudes and perceptions when studying the emergence of leadership and leadership outcomes (Collinson, 2005; Lord & Brown, 2004; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). From this leader-centered perspective, followers are treated as the passive recipients of leader influence and leadership outcomes (e.g., trait and behavioral paradigms of leadership), moderators of leader influence (e.g., contingency theories of leadership) (Shamir, 2007). In response to this leader driven perspective a more follower-centered view emerged (e.g., Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Meindl, 1995). These views argue that because leaders exist in the same social context as their followers, leadership and its outcomes are jointly constructed (Meindl, 1990, 1995). From this perceptive, follower beliefs, traits and perceptions drive how followers construe leadership and are viewed as important to the leadership process as leader traits and behaviors (Shamir, 2007). Followership (Carsten et al., 2010; Collinson, 2006; Kelley, 1988), a new stream of leadership research, employs a similar follower-centered perspective, but broadens the focus to include follower decisions, behaviors and attitudes. In short, followership positions followers as actively and explicitly influencing leader perceptions, attitudes, behaviors or decisions. As will become clear in the following sections, this shift in perspective helps us build on traditional leadership theories to offer a theoretical framework for the impact of followers on leaders.

2.1. The role of followers in traditional leadership research

The traditional view of leadership framed followers as the passive recipients of leader characteristics (e.g., traits and skills) and behaviors and restricted itself to examining the flow of influence from leaders to followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hollander, 1980, 1992). This limited perspective began to change with situational theories of leader effectiveness (i.e., contingency models) that recognized the potential effects of followers on leader behaviors and identified when and for whom certain leader behaviors were optimal. In many of these theories, follower effects are either explicitly modeled (e.g., Fiedler, 1967) or implicitly hinted at (e.g., Evans, 1970). For example, Fiedler's Contingency Theory theorized that the relationship between leadership style and leader effectiveness was based on whether or not the leader's style matched the context, in particular the quality of the leader-member relations (the extent to which followers trust, respect, and have confidence in their leaders, Fiedler, 1967). Other contingency theories followed suit. Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) Situational Leadership Theory suggested that leaders should strike a balance between their task- and people-oriented behaviors depending on the confidence and skill set of their followers while Path-Goal Theory (Evans, 1970; House, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974) argued that follower characteristics were key factors to shaping leader effectiveness.

In each of these approaches the role of followers is made clear. Their capabilities, traits or preferences are said to determine what type of leader is most effective (Achua & Lussier, 2007; Yukl, 2013). However, in each of these theories followers are still non-actors. They are not behaving or explicitly reacting to leader behaviors. At best they are simply features (albeit important ones) of the leader's context. A truly explicit follower-centered approach did not appear until the emergence of implicit leadership theories (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 1984; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994) and Meindl's (1995) social constructionist approach to leadership (Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2006).

2.2. Follower-centered approaches to leadership

Implicit leadership theories (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 1984; Offermann et al., 1994) argue that leadership actually exists in the minds of followers. These approaches represent the first shift from a leader-centered to a follower-centered perspective of leadership. They focus on how followers' implicit beliefs and assumptions regarding the characteristics of leader effectiveness (e.g., Lord et al., 1984) translate into prototypes for an ideal leader in a given situation or context. Leaders who match the prototype are expected to be assessed more favorably by their followers.

Meindl (1995) built on this approach to argue that leadership can be effective only when followers view it as such and highlighted two important issues regarding the extant leadership research. First, there is a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers. Second, because leadership focuses on "the linkage between leaders and followers as constructed in the minds of followers" (p. 220), leadership outcomes should not be operationalized as the self-perceptions or self-reports of leaders, but as the perceptions of followers (Bligh & Schyns, 2007).

This follower-centered approach to leadership research did not assign an active role to followers, however it did argue that follower perceptions, preferences or attitudes (as influenced by their traits and emotional arousal) can (passively) shape or even restrain leadership processes (e.g., Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2011; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). A good example of this is the recent work of Grant and his colleagues (2011) in which they demonstrated that employee proactivity and employee perceptions of receptivity moderate the relationship between leader extraversion and group performance such that when followers are more proactive leader extraversion is negatively rather than positively, related to group performance.

This new follower-centered approach triggered a series of theoretical extensions and empirical tests of the potential of followers to shape the leadership process. One of these lines of research argued that leadership is a social process or system and that leaders, as part of this social system, are subject to its influences (e.g., followers) (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001; Lord et al., 1999). As we will discuss shortly, it is this emphasis on the social nature of leadership that makes social influence a logical framework for theorizing about the effects of followers on leaders. First, however, it is necessary to review the next step in the evolution of the literature on follower effects, followership.

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