

LEADERSHIP DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

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Much leadership literature neglects its historical-contextual antecedents and as a result over-emphasizes zeitgeist, or tenor of the time's social forces. This neglect impedes leadership research by encouraging academic amnesia and promoting a strong feeling of research déjà vu among many researchers and practitioners. In this article, we develop a leadership historical-contextual superstructure consisting of evolutionary antecedents, paradigmatic antecedents, purpose and definitional antecedents, stakeholder antecedents, levels of analysis and temporal antecedents, and research dissemination antecedents. We use this superstructure to analyze current work in the increasingly important relational leadership research stream to illustrate how the superstructure's use can aid leadership researchers and practitioners in avoiding leadership déjà vu and academic amnesia and help build a more cumulative field.

The dominant portion of leadership theories and research is primarily concerned with relationships between leaders and their immediate followers or with supervisory behaviors. It is almost as though leadership scholars . . . have believed that leader-follower relationships exist in a vacuum. While it is unlikely that scholars believe this, the fact is that the organizational and environmental context in which leadership is enacted has been almost completely ignored.

Leadership studies are unlikely to be of any additive value until they take into account organizational variables. If the effects of varying leadership styles are to be unraveled, the research design will need either to hold organizational variables constant and explore for leadership effects, or to explore the interac-

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tion effects by incorporating organizational variables and leadership dimensions. . . . Neither of these is likely to occur until organizational researchers pay greater attention to leadership models and leadership researchers pay greater attention to organizational models.

Here is a *very* [emphasis added] partial list of new metaphors to describe leaders: gardeners, midwives, stewards, servants, missionaries, facilitators, conveners. Although each takes a slightly different approach, they all name a new posture for leaders, a stance that relies on new relationships with their networks of employees, stakeholders, and communities. No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished.

The interactions, dynamic relationships rather than compartmentalized jobs, are basic characteristics. Continuity of flows are the objective, tying together the independent parts of the total operation that have been fractionated by the need for specialists, departments and organizational checks and balances. There are not the neat beginnings and ends, the sharp demarcation lines between what is inside and what is outside, between what is past what is present and what is future that are associated with essentially legalistic static models of human groups.

The quotations above represent two currently increasingly hot topics in the leadership literature—an organizational or macro focus and a relational focus. We challenge the reader to speculate on the dates of the publications in which these quotes appeared.

The first is from House and Aditya (1997, p. 445). The second is a quote from Melcher, twenty years earlier (Melcher, 1977, p. 99). Similarly, and this time in reverse order by date, the third quote, covering relational leadership, is from Wheatley (1999, p. 165) and the fourth quote is from Sayles (1964, p. 259). Also, most of us are well aware that quotes such as those above are equally representative of other aspects of the leadership field, if not of organizational research in general. In other words, as Yogi Berra would say, and our title reiterates, “It’s déjà vu all over again.” All of this is perhaps best captured in the story about a leadership researcher who is reported to have said, “I was gone from the leadership field for about ten years. When I returned, it was if I had been gone ten minutes” (author unknown). For obvious reasons, we call this the “déjà vu effect.”

Leadership is a mature field. Bass (1990), Peterson and Hunt (1997), and Rendova and Starbuck (1997) trace it back as far as ancient Egypt and China. Along with this maturity come numerous leadership models or theories, indeed, arguably, more than in any other area of the behavioral sciences—over a dozen at last count were covered in typical organizational behavior texts (e.g., Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osborn, 2000). The concept is so pervasive that even a modest interpretation of the cross-cultural and universality arguments for the concept in Peterson and Hunt (1997) suggests that if there were no leadership notion, it would have to be invented.

This very maturity and pervasiveness suggests to us that to avoid the déjà vu

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