



Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the current, widely accepted leadership ontology – leaders, followers, and shared goals – is becoming less useful for understanding leadership in contexts that are increasingly peer-like and collaborative. The further development of leadership theory calls for a corresponding development at the level of leadership ontology. Thus, an alternative leadership ontology is proposed: direction, alignment, and commitment. A theoretical framework based on such an ontology is sketched out. It is argued that such a framework can integrate emerging leadership research and ultimately stimulate the development of new leadership theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

The focus of this article is the ontology of leadership – the theory of the entities that are thought to be most basic and essential to any statement about leadership. After identifying and describing the widely accepted current ontology of leadership, we argue that further development of leadership theory and practice calls for a new and more integrative ontology. We then present a general leadership framework based on such an ontology and explore some implications of adopting this framework.

Leadership scholars often describe leadership theory as being highly diverse and lacking integration by quoting the observation of Stogdill (1974), repeated by Bass (1990) that “there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 11). However, we believe that the manifest diversity of leadership theory and definition is actually unified and framed by an underlying ontology that is virtually beyond question within the field. That ontology has recently been articulated by one of the leading scholars in the field as follows: “In its simplest form [leadership] is a tripod—a leader or leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve” (Bennis, 2007, p. 3). This is not a definition of leadership but something much more fundamental: It is an expression of commitment to the entities (leaders, followers, common goals) that are essential and indispensable to leadership and about which any theory of leadership must therefore speak. This ontological commitment means that talk of leadership necessarily involves talking about leaders and followers and their shared goals; likewise, the practice of leadership is essentially the practice of leaders and followers interacting around their shared goals.

We will refer to this ontological commitment as the *tripod*. We should clarify at the outset that in taking Bennis’s statement as an ontological statement (in his own words, this is leadership in its simplest form), and in order to make clear what we see as the limitations of this ontology, we are knowingly overlooking the fact that the vast majority of the leadership theory built on this ontology treats its three elements with the sophistication, nuance, and subtlety that comes from disciplined, well-considered theory and research. Even though it may thus appear that we are setting up the tripod ontology as a straw man, it is not our

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purpose to knock anything down. We fully expect that the tripod ontology will continue to provide a basis for leadership theory and research (not to mention practice) for an indefinite time in the future. Rather, our purpose in focusing at the very basic level of this ontological commitment is to provide a basis of comparison by which the usefulness of the alternative ontology we propose can be evaluated.

We believe that as the contexts calling for leadership become increasingly peer-like and collaborative, the tripod's ontology of leaders and followers will increasingly impose unnecessary limitations on leadership theory and practice. We will argue for an alternative ontology of leadership. To replace the tripod's entities — leaders, followers, and their shared goals — we propose an ontology in which the essential entities are three *leadership outcomes*: (1) *direction*: widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims, and mission; (2) *alignment*: the organization and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective; and (3) *commitment*: the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefit within the collective interest and benefit. (A more detailed discussion of these outcomes is presented later.) Adopting such an ontology would mean that talk of leadership would no longer necessarily involve talk of leaders and followers and their shared goals, but would necessarily involve talk of direction, alignment, and commitment. Likewise, to practice leadership would no longer necessarily involve leaders, followers, and their shared goals but would necessarily involve the production of direction, alignment, and commitment (which may or may not involve leaders and followers). We are therefore advocating the idea that leadership theory and practice would be better served in the future by a development in leadership vocabulary at the most basic ontological level.

Direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC), as the basic vocabulary of leadership, are assumed to be the essential elements of leadership. Whereas with the tripod ontology it is the presence of leaders and followers interacting around their shared goals that marks the occurrence of leadership, with the DAC ontology, it is the presence of direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) that marks the occurrence of leadership. The question of how such outcomes are produced must be approached carefully. If one presumes that such outcomes are produced by any particular social interaction or system, one runs the risk of making the process by which the outcomes are produced ontologically prior to the outcomes themselves. Thus, to treat the outcomes as the ontological foundation of leadership, one must frame their production in the most general terms possible. Since we do assume that leadership involves individuals working together, we will propose that people possess *beliefs about how to produce DAC*, and that those beliefs are the basis for the *social practices* by which DAC is actually produced. This begins to sketch out the rudiments of a leadership theory founded on the DAC ontology. A much fuller discussion of this framework is presented below (see *Overview of a leadership framework based on the DAC ontology* below).

A key question about an alternative ontology is what good is it. What is the value of a change in leadership vocabulary at the most basic and essential level? The answer is that with a new ontology, leadership theory would address new and different basic questions. With the tripod, the basic question for leadership theory is: Who are the leaders and how do they interact with followers to attain shared goals? With the tripod, leadership theory basically seeks to explain what characterizes leaders and how they influence followers. With the DAC ontology, leadership theory would seek to explain *how people who share work in collectives produce direction, alignment, and commitment*. Basic questions would address the nature and creation of shared direction, the creation, types, and uses of alignment, and the range of kinds of commitments as well as their development and renewal. In short, the value of a new ontological vocabulary is the creation of new basic questions (which of course does not mean that the old basic questions are no longer worth asking or answering).

Another key consideration lies in the fact that the ontology we are proposing is one of outcomes. It is a pragmatic, functionalist ontology. Pragmatism as a philosophical outlook is committed to the grounding of concepts in outcomes and effects. C.S. Peirce, an early proponent of pragmatism, formulated the key idea: One's conception of the *effects* of an object (that one is mentally constructing) is the *whole of one's conception of the object* (Peirce, 1878). In other words, one only conceives of a something (e.g. loyalty, genes, gravity) by conceiving of the effects or outcomes of that something (e.g. constancy, heritability, acceleration). This leads to what is probably the most commonly known idea of pragmatism, that if there are no differences in practice or outcomes, then differences in theories of practice or outcomes make no difference. Arguably, leadership theory under the ontology of the tripod has not paid much attention to leadership outcomes, lumping them together into goal attainment, and has focused attention on the structure and processes of leadership; this approach tends always to run the risk of differences in theory that make no difference to outcomes. The ontology we propose, on the other hand, would focus leadership theory at its most essential level on practical outcomes; theory would be tied to practice at the level of basic vocabulary.

The outcome (DAC) ontology we propose is also functionalist. Functionalist approaches to leadership theory are not common, and a functionalist approach has both benefits and limitations. The following discussion of the features of a functionalist approach is based on Morgeson and Hofmann (1999).

First, a key benefit of a functionalist approach is that a focus on outcomes has the potential to integrate across levels of analysis. Whether DAC is produced by an individual, a dyad, a group, an organization, or an organization of organizations, and no matter how the structure and process varies across those levels, those structures and processes can be integrated by a theory focused on outcomes. Second, the function of processes does not determine the structure of processes; outcomes can be realized in multiple ways. This enables a functionalist ontology to bridge across, for example, cultural differences in structure and process that result in similar outcomes. Third, a focus on outcomes entails less differentiation in the conception of the structures and processes themselves. Thus, whereas under the ontology of the tripod, leader–follower processes are quite differentiated from, say, organizational learning processes, under an outcome ontology they would be functionally equivalent in so far as they both result in DAC. We believe that this loss in differentiation of processes is compensated for by a gain in integration across levels, structures, and processes (including cultural differences). Fourth, a focus on functions and outcomes raises problems of causality: how would a researcher, for example, know that a certain process caused a given outcome? This problem is, of course, not new to the study of

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