



What Leadership Thought Leaders Have Gotten Wrong (for Centuries)

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Published on www.lorman.com - January 2020

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What Leadership Thought Leaders Have Gotten Wrong (for Centuries)

Ryan Gottfredson

If you are not aware, leadership statistics are bleak.

- 60% of employees report that their direct leader damages their self-esteem
- 65% of employees would prefer to have a new direct leader compared to more pay
- 82% of employees can't trust their leader to tell the truth

Are these statistics the result of a lack of effort by leaders or those who develop them? I don't think so.

I think it is because leadership thought leaders have taken a systematic approach to leadership that is fundamentally flawed.

From the time of the ancient Greeks, the study of leadership has involved identifying what traits one needs to have to be an effective leader. Unfortunately, while this focus is widely accepted, it limits our thinking about leadership, leadership development, and leadership effectiveness.

The attempt to identify leadership traits has led to mountains of research, hundreds of books, and thousands of web articles, all claiming to have identified the essential qualities of leadership. When viewed collectively, they reveal dozens, if not hundreds, of different traits or qualities that leaders need to have to be effective.

This is problematic on several levels.

On the surface, such a collective list feels confusing and daunting. What traits do I really need to have to be an effective leader?

A little deeper, this approach is wrong. There are great leaders out there who do not possess many of the traits or qualities that are identified across these resources. Further, there are bad leaders who possess many of these traits or qualities.

What is going on here?

The reason for this chaos is that the search for leadership traits is short-sighted. And, short-sighted questions lead to short-sighted answers.

Trait Approach to Leadership

Asking the question, "What traits does a person need to have to be an effective leader?" is designed to identify sets of characteristics about a person that explain why they may act differently from another person in the same situation.

While this is well intended, it carries assumptions that are limited at best and wrong at worst.

- Assumption #1: Leaders act the same across situations
- Assumption #2: When a leader acts differently across similar situations, the differences are viewed as error and internal contradictions
- Assumption #3: The psychological processes and dynamics that underlie behaviors are unimportant

- Assumption #4: When traits are “broken,” the leader is “broken”
- Assumption #5: The situations leaders encounter are unimportant when explaining why leaders do what they do

Can you get on board with any of these? I can't.

Really, the only good thing about this approach to leadership is that it is simple and we like simple. But, simple does not mean accuracy.

But, there is good news. You see, although this trait approach is the dominant approach in the study of leadership, it is “old news” in the study of psychology. Psychologists now fully recognize this approach as being a flawed and limited approach. Even better, psychologists have identified a much better approach to explaining why people do what they do. Unfortunately, this approach just hasn't been widely accepted within leadership research and practice.

Better Approach to Leadership

What psychologists have realized that leaders do not act the same across similar situations. For example, consider a leader getting feedback. It is likely that a leader is going to respond differently when getting feedback from a superior versus a subordinate.

Psychologists have realized that we need to account for this difference. The difference is the context or the situation.

If we want to better understand what makes some leaders more effective than others we need to consider:

- The situation that the leader is in
- AND the traits the leader possesses.

When we shift from a trait approach to a situation-trait approach, we shift our focus away from identifying a taxonomy of **traits** to understanding the underlying cognitive **processes** involved in why leaders do what they do. This latter approach has allowed psychologists to better address why and when leaders behave distinctively. And, it has important implications for the development and effectiveness of leaders.

This shift from leader traits to leader processes has led psychologists to alter their thinking. Instead of believing that leaders respond in a predictable pattern across situations, they now believe that leaders respond in a predictable pattern to situational cues. Specific situational cues activate certain traits of the individual, and this activation process best explains why leaders behave the way they do.

For example, receiving feedback from a superior involves situational cues informing the leader that he/she does not have organizational power, possibly activating humility. But, receiving feedback from a subordinate involves situational cues informing the leader that he/she does have organizational power, possibly activating arrogance.

Assumptions associated with this approach include:

- Assumption #1: Leadership context has a significant influence on the expression of leadership

- Assumption #2: We should not expect the individual to behave similarly across different situations unless they are functionally equivalent in meaning
- Assumption #3: Leaders act the same across situational cues, and this pattern is commonly stable (and therefore can be predicted)

These assumptions feel more accurate.

What this Means for Leaders

While there is much to be gained from this new approach, let me highlight two benefits I consider most interesting.

It Changes How We Think of Ourselves (Meta-Cognition)

[Tasha Eurich has found that 95% of people think they are self-aware, yet only 10-15% are actually self-aware.](#)

I think a main reason for this is that we tend to take the trait approach to ourselves. We seek to identify the traits that we have and then we tend to believe we operate with those traits similarly across situations.

For example, most people consider themselves as being kind. Thus, they believe that they are kind across all situations, and any attempts to inform them that they may not be unkind will likely result in defensiveness.

But, the reality is that we are all kind in some situations and we can be real jerks in other situations.

So, when we apply the situation-trait approach to ourselves, it opens us up to gain a more accurate understanding of ourselves by asking the questions: Under what circumstances do I operate effectively? And, under what circumstances do I operate ineffectively?

This implies that effective leadership isn't about possessing certain traits, it is about learning to navigate the situations we find ourselves in more effectively. This leads to the next interesting benefit.

It Shifts Our Focus for Leadership Development

Until now, leadership development has focused on the improvement of traits and behaviors, generally with little concern for the role the situation plays in how we operate.

But, when we recognize that situational cues activate certain traits and behavioral dispositions, it becomes essential to understand how our brain cognitively encodes situational cues and activates our brain to function in specific patterns unique to the specific cues. This leads us to ask the questions:

- What causes us to pick up on certain situational cues and not others?
- What activates our traits and cognitive processes to navigate our situations?

It is our mindsets, our mental lenses that cause us to pick up on select cues (e.g., challenges are things to avoid vs. challenges are things to learn from), and activates appropriate responses (e.g., avoid challenges vs. take on challenges).

How we operate as leaders from situation to situation is primed by our mindsets. This implies that if we want to improve as a leader, we need to understand our current mindsets and improve them. If we can improve our mindsets, we can better read and respond to our situations in more effective ways.

If you would like to better understand your mindsets and how you can improve them to become a better, take this free personal mindset assessment: <https://ryangottfredson.com/personal-mindset-assessment>

Summary

Many leaders take the trait approach to themselves. When they introspect, they see themselves as having many traits important for leadership effectiveness. They simultaneously believe that their traits cause them to operate positively across all situations.

But, the reality is that leaders operate differently across situations. Because leaders overlook this, they are limited in their self-awareness. They see themselves as an all-around great leader, unable to see that while they may be a great leader in some situations, they are likely a very poor leader in other situations.

The result: leaders who think they are doing a great job and dismal leadership statistics.

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