1. Introduction: the dialogue of disciplines

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The discussion and study of leadership is old—stretching back to the earliest of written texts. As Bernard Bass (Bass and Bass, 2008) notes in The Bass Handbook of Leadership, “Myths and legends about great leaders were important in the development of civilized societies” (p. 4). Leaders and leadership are important themes in the ancient Greek and Latin classics, in the Old Testament of the Bible, in the Hindu religious texts, and in the Canons of Confucianism. Bass also notes that Egyptian hieroglyphs for leader, leadership and follower were written over 5000 years ago. So leadership is woven into the very fabric of civilization.

Taken further, the roots of leadership are likely “hard-wired” into the DNA of humans, and of all social animals. Dominance hierarchies are critical to the structure of social groups, and the higher that animals go in the evolutionary chain, the more the behavior of dominant “alpha” males or females begins to look like the evolutionary roots of leadership. These social animal packs look to the alpha “leader” for direction, for protection, and the pack leader plays a critical role in keeping the social order. For instance, in wolves, the pack’s dominant male plays a critical role in hunting activities and initiating travel, while the dominant female takes the lead in protecting the pack and in nurturing pups (Mech, 2000). Indeed, scholars in animal behavior have recently begun to explore parallels between pack animals’ dominance behavior and leadership (for example, Bonanni et al., 2010). We are, after all, merely social animals. Unfortunately, the discipline of animal behavior and its perspective on leadership is not included in this collection, but most other relevant disciplines are.

What is included here is a variety of disciplinary approaches to the study of leadership, ranging from the arts and humanities, to the social sciences, and to more applied perspectives. Our intent was to gather leadership scholar experts from various disciplines and have them provide an overview of how their particular discipline approaches the study of leadership as well as providing some of the key findings, theories, and/or concepts associated with their discipline’s study of leadership. In the integrative final chapter, the disciplinary
perspectives are interwoven by Michael Harvey and framed around seven questions that groups and leaders must answer. Harvey uses these questions, derived from the disciplinary inquiries of our leadership scholars, to create a model of how and why leaders might (or might not) be effective.

LEADERSHIP IS STUDIED THROUGH DISCIPLINARY LENSES

Traditionally, the topic of leadership has been studied in different ways by different disciplines. In a discipline such as political science, the study of leadership has focused a great deal on “elites” – leaders of kingdoms, nations, or political movements – and how they have shaped political processes and outcomes (Hargrove, 2004). Other disciplines, most notably psychology (and psychiatry), have also focused on the leader, but are more concerned with the inner workings of the leader’s personality and how the leader’s characteristics and behavior influence followers. Historians take a different approach. They focus more on the historical context and the forces that push and pull the leader into action. Each discipline brings its own perspective and approach to the study of leadership.

This creates something akin to the old (and overused) story of the blind men and the elephant, with each discipline feeling a different piece of the leadership elephant and trying to conceptualize the entire beast. Not only are we each studying different aspects of leadership, but we are using different methodologies. Historical analyses, case studies, qualitative and quantitative analyses, are all methodologies used in leadership studies, with different disciplines leaning more heavily on one methodology rather than others. This means that not only do we have different disciplinary points of view, but in describing leadership (the elephant), we are speaking different languages.

The problem is exacerbated by the tendency for the disciplines that study leadership to be “ivory towers” – with scholars staying within their own discipline, writing for and reading only the disciplinary journals, and believing in the correctness (and superiority?) of their home disciplinary approach. Like the blind men, their perspective and understanding is severely limited.

Many scholars are drawn to study leadership because it is a rich and important topic. Leadership, particularly in Western cultures, is also a “hot” topic, as evidenced by the constant attention given to leaders in government and business, and the many wildly popular books on leaders and leadership. Indeed, those high-profile leadership scholars who have successfully crossed over to the more popular media, are often labeled “leadership gurus”. It’s hard to imagine top scholars in other disciplines – chemistry, music, engineering – being called “gurus”. Despite this attraction, however, it is difficult to study
leadership in some disciplines, where leadership is a marginal or peripheral topic. Moreover, in order to carry out the most impactful scholarship in leadership, requires an ability to cross disciplines and integrate information from many different perspectives.

So in some ways, this collection is a primer on leadership studies. It is an introduction to the perspectives, methods and findings of each of the represented disciplines. We hope that through an understanding of how different disciplines approach the study of leadership, and by focusing on the major themes in each discipline, we will be able to establish some common ground for conceptual and research progress in the field of leadership studies.

ABOUT THE BOOK

This collection begins with an introductory section and chapters focused on the interdisciplinary nature of leadership studies and how that has impacted the field in the past, currently and in the future. Riggio addresses the question of whether leadership studies is (or should/could be) a distinct academic discipline. He concludes that it is an “emerging discipline”, and he has hopes that the disciplinary divisions that characterize the field can be successfully overcome.

Joanne B. Ciulla, one of the founding faculty of the first school of leadership studies, discusses the history of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, and the experiment of having scholars from different disciplines reside in a single school, with a common focus on leadership. Ciulla suggests that leadership as a topic of study is a natural fit with the liberal arts. She also argues that the study of leadership is best approached from a traditional disciplinary perspective.

The second, and largest, section of the book covers the disciplinary approaches to leadership studies. The chapters are arranged in a somewhat historical order, beginning with the classical origins of thinking about leadership, especially in Greek philosophy, moving through the traditional social sciences, and into newer perspectives in the arts and humanities.

Michael A. Genovese, a political scientist, and Lawrence A. Trtle, a historian, discuss how leadership is portrayed in the classic literature of early Western civilization. Focusing on early political philosophers and historians, from Plato to Plutarch and forward to Machiavelli, they demonstrate that the understanding of political leadership requires knowledge of the history, culture and philosophy in which the leaders of the ancient empires were embedded. They conclude that understanding of the evolution of leadership, and key concepts such as constitutionalism and democracy, need to be approached through an interdisciplinary study of the Classics.
In her chapter, “Handmaiden and queen”, philosopher Joanne B. Ciulla presents a primer on how philosophy has contributed to the study and understanding of leadership. She characterizes Anglo-American analytic philosophers as supporting the study of leadership (they are the “handmaiden”), and European continental philosophers as attempting to answer the big questions about leadership (and life; they are the “Queen”). Ciulla also relates her own personal journey as one of the first philosophers to jump fully into leadership studies, wrestling with questions such as the definition of leadership and what constitutes a good leader.

Historian J. Thomas Wren discusses history’s unique approach to the study of leadership. According to Wren, history looks at particulars, not patterns. The social sciences seek to use patterns to predict future leadership behaviors and outcomes. History looks to the past to understand the present and the future. Wren outlines the methods of historical analysis used to study leadership, and argues that historical analyses have much to contribute to our understanding of leadership, particularly history’s emphasis on “context”, “characters”, and “complexity”.

Stephen P. Turner takes a look at sociologist Max Weber, and his seminal contribution to leadership through the theory of charismatic authority. In this chapter we get a glimpse into a sociological interpretation of charisma and charismatic leadership and their implications for leadership today – a century after Weber developed the theory. In the second sociology chapter Sonia M. Ospina and Margo Hittleman suggest that sociology has contributed an understanding of the social structures that make different forms of leadership possible. Moreover, they argue that the trend toward studying leaders and followers, and their interactions, ignores the larger and critically important social context. Ospina and Hittleman argue that leadership research will be richer if it incorporates a “sociological lens”.

Psychologists George R. Goethals and Crystal L. Hoyt explore psychology’s many contributions to leadership studies. Using classic case studies of leaders, Goethals and Hoyt answer the questions of what makes leadership necessary, possible, and what makes leadership effective. Beginning with evolutionary theory, and incorporating key theories from social psychology, the authors cover a wide landscape of leadership issues in their effort to show how psychology has contributed mightily to our understanding of leaders, leadership processes and leadership outcomes.

In the first of our management chapters, Ronald E. Riggio suggests that the ultimate reason that management scholars and business schools are interested in leadership is to make business managers and leaders more efficient and effective. However, he observes that as management theories became more sophisticated, and research work more intense, the leadership theories became mechanistic and took much of the human element out of leadership. More
recent management theories and research have restored that human element, and have begun to incorporate broader disciplinary perspectives into the study of leadership.

The second management chapter, by Susan Elaine Murphy and Stefanie K. Johnson, focuses on the dichotomy that exists in US and Western business schools and management faculty. On the one hand, business schools purport to develop better business leaders. Business school faculty, who are focused on making important research contributions to theory on management and leadership practices and to teach about these theories, assume that knowledge will lead to better practice. On the other hand, effective leadership is as much “art” (meaning leadership skills) as it is science. Murphy and Johnson challenge the traditional business school model and suggest that a revolution needs to take place if business schools are indeed going to produce better leaders. This chapter has important implications for leader education and development for all disciplines.

Norman W. Provizer discusses why political science has not contributed more to the study of leadership, despite its central role in analyzing governing processes. Using an analysis of power as a prime example, Provizer argues that political science has much to offer the study of leadership and he reviews some of his discipline’s most important contributions.

Using the concept of stories as an important vehicle for understanding the complexities of leaders and leadership, Robert J. Sternberg gives us insight into the approach some educational scholars have used to frame leadership. With illustrations from recent US Presidential elections, Sternberg discusses the impact that a good, consistent, and moving leader story can have. In the process, he touches on issues of perceived leader authenticity and the role that media portrayals of leaders can have on determining who gets to lead and how that leader’s story plays out.

As a professor who studies literature and film, Nicholas O. Warner shows the enormous capacity of literature to aid our understanding of leadership and leadership processes. Picking up on the theme of stories in the previous chapter, Warner shows us how storytelling (through literature, plays, films, music, poetry) can shape our ideas about leaders and leadership and can reflect how a culture thinks (and should think) about leadership.

Anu M. Mitra, in her “Learning how to look” chapter shows us how an appreciation of the arts can help facilitate understanding of leadership. Mitra presents an arts appreciation program that, through systematic observation and reflection, allows leaders (and anyone) to enhance their capacity to understand the complexity of the world around us and to solve problems.

Michael Harvey closes the book by integrating the various disciplinary perspectives and drawing some common threads together. We will, however, allow you to read that later. For now, go forward, and enjoy the multi-disciplinary field of Leadership Studies.
REFERENCES


