Rost Update Paper

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Introduction

This report serves as an expansion on the work of Rost (1993). It is a critique of more recent definitions of leadership, assessing whether current authors in the field are defining leadership, and if so, on what basis. This paper analyzes the present state of leadership understanding and compares it to Rost’s assessment. Rost’s key concerns are identified and considered for how effectively they are being addressed in current leadership writings. Recommendations, as related to these concerns, are provided for scholars who are presently involved in leadership research and publishing.

Defining Leadership

Joseph C. Rost is credited with providing the field of leadership with an unprecedented work that, according to Burns, is “the most important critique of leadership studies in our time” (Rost, 1993, p. xii). Rost, himself, states that

*Leadership for the Twenty-first Century* is a critique of the efforts of leadership scholars and practitioners in the twentieth century to understand leadership based on the values and cultural norms of the industrial paradigm...and is an effort to move understanding of leadership forward, toward the postindustrial paradigm that will take hold in the twenty-first century” (p. xiv).

In support of this study, various research journal articles, books and leadership texts were searched to discover if current leadership authors are defining leadership and whether they were using their own or another’s definition and the effectiveness of the definitions postulated. The results of the efforts to cull definitions were disconcerting. For example, when searching both the General Reference Center Gold and Business Source Premier databases for full-text articles
using various absolute leadership terminologies, very few hits were obtained when compared to the number of hits for the general term *leadership*, as noted in the table below:

Table 1

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Note: The database “General Reference” refers to General Center Reference Gold database.

Research efforts through perusing current leadership books and texts resulted in similar findings. Just as disappointing was the discovery that very few definitions were actually definitions – they were more descriptive in nature with many of them lacking congruence. It is as Glendenning (1997) states, “controversies persist over the definition of leadership” (p. 268).

Sampling of Definitions by School of Thought

**Leadercentric Ability.** Geneen defines leadership as “the ability to inspire other people to work together as a team, following your lead, in order to attain a common objective, whether in business, in politics, in war, or on the football field” (Krass, 1998, p. 4). Belgrave (1995) believes it “is a manager’s [italics added] ability to motivate staff to develop their capabilities by inspiring them to achieve” (p. 312). Clawson’s (2003) take is that it is “the ability to influence others and the willingness to do so in such a way that they respond voluntarily” (p. 177).

**Leadercentric Art/Skill.** Pratt (1995) reverts to Vance Packard’s 1960 definition: “the art of getting others to want to do something that you are convinced should be done” (p. 16); while Fulton (1995) describes leadership as “the art of influencing and directing people…” (p. viii).
Hunter (1998) states that leadership is “the skill of influencing people to work enthusiastically toward goals identified as being for the common good” (p. 28). More recently, however, Hunter (2004) changed the word “skill” to “skills” and extended the definition to include “with character that inspires confidence” (p. 32).

**Relational.** According to Daft (2005), it is “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their shared purposes” (p. 5). Kouzes and Posner (2002) simply describe leadership as “a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow” (p. xxviii).

**Process.** Nutt (1995) defines leadership “as a process of guidance carried out to make something happen” (p. 64). Lusser and Achua (2001) define it as “the influencing process of leaders and followers to achieve organizational objectives through change” (p. 6). Chelladurai and Quek (1995) refer to Stogdill’s 1950 definition: “the process of influencing the activities of an organized group towards goal setting and goal achievement” (p. 91).

**Various.** Glendenning and Gordon (1996) describe it as “a focus of group activity and process, the exercise of influence...a demonstration of power...a differentiated role...the initiation of a role structure” (p. 260). Catlin and Matthews (n.d.) state that it “is knowing what you want, planning for it, and doing it as best as you can” (p. 13); while other authors offer the following definitions: a “sociological phenomen” (Pierce and Newstrom, 2003, p. 8); “a journey that starts from within” says Gergen (Coughlin, 2005, p. xx); “a set of processes…” (Kotter, 1996, p. 25); and “a set of qualities that causes people to follow” (Loeb & Kindel, 1999, p. 9).

Rost (1993) adamantly scolded scholars for “not provid[ing] a definition of leadership that is (a) clear, (b) concise, (c) understandable by scholars and practitioners, (d) researchable, (e) practically relevant, and (f) persuasive” (p. 99). It seems that his scorn prevails yet today, for
if we accept Rost’s criteria as a requirement for an *effective* definition, then none of the definitions mentioned in the previous sections appear to be effective. Individually, they are ineffective. However, before we throw out the baby with the bath water so-to-speak, we should consider what Hunt and Dodge (2001) assert: that “it seems obvious that leadership would be dynamic, emphasize relationships, and be deeply embedded within ever-changing and complex systems on the edge of chaos” (p. 451), and as such, it can be said that many of the definitions cited contain effectual essences in and of themselves, giving credence to the multifaceted nature of leadership.

**State of Leadership**

“What is leadership?” she asked. A feeling of chilling synchronicity swept over me. I explained…that this was exactly the question I helped people answer every day for a living; that I had worked at one of Americas top leadership development firms, The Tom Peters Company, for many years; and that it would take me at least a week and a lot more than a five-inch rectangle of paper to even begin to try to answer the question in a meaningful way (Farber, 2004, p. 4).

This somewhat humorous but apropos story is indicative of the surreal state of leadership understanding in 2007 and is seen as a continuum of that which Rost described in 1993. In fact, Rost (1993), who touts that his assessment was in part an agreement with the Chester Barnard’s 1948 assessment, claims that “leadership has been the subject of an extraordinary amount of dogmatically stated nonsense.” Rost supplants this assessment by saying, “if he [Barnard] could say that in 1948, when the leadership literature, if piled together, would amount to only a small hill, what would he say in 1990, when the leadership literature approaches the size of a small mountain” (p. 179). Seventeen years ago, Rost questioned the validity and reliability of so many
works on leadership when those producing the works could not define leadership or distinguish it from other elements (p. 179). The relevance of his questioning is applicable still.

Another poignant truth that overshadows Rost’s (1993) assessment is that little has changed over the years within the field of leadership. Hunt and Dodge (2001) state that the reality of this present-day state of leadership is “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 as if I had been gone ten minutes” (author unknown)” (p. 436).

The field of leadership continues to be inundated with voluminous works authored by scholars and practitioners without the guidance of an acceptable, agreed-upon definition; resulting in little change within the discipline over the course of time. That being said, is there any evidence that the discipline of leadership studies is beginning to move forward in clearly defining itself? This author believes that there is some movement forward, albeit ever so slight. What appears to be taking place, at least in those circles that have not yet offered an explicative definition of leadership, is a patterning of thought as to what has hindered the leadership field’s efforts thus far – possibly for the first time the right questions are beginning to be asked.

What this research effort revealed was that leadership field scholars are beginning to view themselves (collectively) as the enemy. It is as if in their attempts over the course of these many years to obtain the authoritative leadership definition and in the production of many nonsensical publications, they have come to realize that the problem lies with themselves. Dodge and Hunt (2001) refer to the problem as the “déjà vu effect.” (p. 416). This “circular reasoning” (Wasbush, 1994, p. 241) state of leadership studies has circumvented progress. Dodge and Hunt state that it “is not unique to the leadership field,” referencing the works of Sayles and Stewart (1995) “who coined the phrase “academic amnesia” in which “they argue...
that selective perception [italics added] of particular disciplinary approaches has led to this amnesia” (p. 417). This self-reflection regarding perceptions and research methodologies by those within the discipline of leadership, in this author’s view, evidences the beginnings of a move forward, however slight.

Leadership Concerns – Rost to Present-Day

In his 1993 classic critique, Leadership for the Twenty-first Century, Rost goes beyond his assessment of the state of leadership studies by expounding his key concerns. One pervasive concern, as evidenced by its overarching presence throughout the text, is a collection of three themes relegated to leadership studies: the emphasis on the nature and content of leadership (p. 3), the inability to clearly define leadership (p. 6), and the “failure of scholars and practitioners to develop a readily recognizable school of leadership” (p. 9). Have these themes been addressed? This study found no such evidence – only further confirmation supporting Rost’s original prevalent concern, with the noted exception of researcher self-reflection as stated in the previous section.

Another concern espoused by Rost (1993) regards paradigmatic fallacy – the fallacy that an industrial leadership paradigm should not continue to exist as the dominant leadership paradigm. He ascribes the following as industrial leadership paradigm characteristics:

(1) a structural-functionalist view of organizations, (2) a view of management as the preeminent profession, (3) a personalistic focus on the leader, (4) a dominant objective of goal achievement, (5) a self-interested and individualistic outlook, (6) a male model of life, (7) a utilitarian and materialistic ethical perspective, and (8) a rational, technocratic, linear, quantitative, and scientific language and methodology (p. 180).
Rost postulates that “there is more and more evidence to conclude that the industrial paradigm is losing its hold…[that we are in the midst of a] values and cultural norms shift from an industrial to a postindustrial frame” (p. 181).

There is evidence that this concern of Rost (1993) is being addressed. However, the start of an evolution of a postindustrial paradigm does not seem to be coming forth from the academic realm so much as it is from the practitioner realm. The “leadership literature that has an impact on those studying or practicing leadership tends to….reflect seventeenth-century Newtonian science” (Hunt & Dodge, 2001, p. 441) even though “management educators have long understood (although not always acted on) the potential dysfunctions of treating organizations like machines and treating people like their parts” (Washbush, 1994, p. 241). Practitioners on the other hand have begun to realize and actualize the reality that “the 21st century…will require a dramatically different way of leading….leaders of the 21st century will have to be expert in understanding, accepting and working with the feelings, attitudes, beliefs, values, and desires of people if they wish to be successful….attending to the soft stuff” (Johnson, 2000, p. 9).

Another key concern of Rost (1993) is the “long and illustrious history in leadership studies” [to]…confuse leadership and management…treating the words as if they were synonymous in the mainstream literature of leadership” (p. 129). Hunt and Dodge (2001) refer to Gardner and Schermerborn (1992) to reiterate “the [present] extent to which leadership and management are conceptualized relative to each other…1) leadership equals management; 2) leadership does not equal management (they are entirely separate concepts); and 3) leadership and management are complementary” (p. 441). This study found that each of these concepts still permeate current leadership literature and practice. However, it also became apparent that the stance taken by a scholar or practitioner - regarding one of the three aforementioned concepts,
generally appears to be dependent upon the interpretation of leadership and management as either nouns, such as in the personification of a role or characterized as a system; or as verbs, referencing action and/or behavior.

One other key concern shared by Rost (1993) is that of leadership and ethics. He stated that “clearly, the [current] systems of ethical thought… are inadequate to the task of making moral judgments about the content of leadership [and for this reason]….leaders and followers must develop new language….center[ing] on an integrated concept of the common good…” (p. 180). Although no new language has been developed to-date, the issue is presently being addressed in various circles primarily as a reaction to recent business scandals such as Enron. However, these initial attempts still lack the integration Rost sought in the new language as evidenced by such literary comments as “leaders need to be modeling behavior, what you want you must model…. [and] the “oughts” are shaped by the perspective of leadership that one holds” (Fairholm, 2004, p. 587).

Recommendations

It is this author’s recommendation that leadership scholars – those doing research and publishing, should ignore what the people want as noted by Fisher (2004):

the people want leadership that is comfortable in a world of uncertainty, contradiction, controversy, conflict, confusion and confrontation; leadership that is fluid and counterintuitive; leadership that breaks the shackles of linear logic and vertical thinking; leadership that is not self-conscious about being spiritual; leadership that has the heart of a warrior and soul of the artist (p. 6).

Instead, scholars should seek to define leadership utilizing accepted guidelines. A second recommendation is one that champions the “need [for] an historical-contextual superstructure to
assess the role of a given leadership perspective in terms of gaining, using, and assessing leadership knowledge” (Hunt & Dodge, 2001, p. 437). This recommendation is made to encourage proper research/researcher alignment and focus, instead of upon the “zeitgeist, or tenor of the times social forces” (p. 435). It also facilitates the elimination of “fool[ing] ourselves into thinking that the differences between modernism and postmodernism are so great that they share nothing in common” (Tierney, 1996, p. 373).

The third recommendation is that both qualitative and quantitative research methods be employed and the seeking of ever better ways of conducting research while incorporating the concept of reflexivity which is “the ability to engage in a dialectical process with regard to the theoretical constructs of the researcher, the informant’s concepts, the data itself, and the researcher’s ideological supposition” (Tierney, 1996, p. 377). The assumption is that better research methods will lead to a study of both “the small and the large acts within an organization [including those of the researcher] to make sense of leadership” (p. 375) with the hope of developing an effective definition of leadership that will prompt “new research agendas that offer dramatically new ways of seeing, and hence acting, in the world” (p. 372).

Although the above recommendations are centered on the efforts of the researcher, there is another recommendation – that researchers and practitioners work in tandem to resolve the concerns espoused by Rost (1993), which are as significant today as they were then. The issues regarding leadership studies, the non-perception of a postindustrial paradigm, the lack of distinction between management and leadership in current leadership literature, and the need for new ethical leadership language can be better addressed by the joint efforts of both - researchers and practitioners, in theory and application. It all begins with asking the right questions and making the right observances.
References


