

The Evolution of the Concept of Leadership and its Academic Discipline

Facing uncertain situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, sexual misconduct, racism and inequality, economic crises, and distrust of established institutions, people are increasingly looking for reassurance and guidance from their leaders. In fact, in the United States, the 2020 election witnessed the highest voter turnout for a presidential election in over a century. According to the US Election Project, nearly 150 million people cast a ballot.

While thinking about leaders, most people can come up with numerous adjectives: honest, collaborative, inclusive, agile, articulate, confident, intelligent, and many more. Leadership is a major buzzword not only in politics and corporate governance, but also in education and personal development. Indeed, in 2020, a study by Infopro Learning reported that 83% of the surveyed organizations prioritized leadership development for their employees. The word “leadership,” what it entails, and the study of it have evolved dramatically over the last several decades.

Historically, the concept of leadership had not garnered much attention because it was assumed to be something that only a few gifted individuals possessed. Nevertheless, this perspective shifted when social scientists began studying leadership more deeply in the 1930s. Notably, Kurt Lewin and his colleagues, Lippett and White, identified three different types of leadership: laissez-fair, authoritarian, and democratic. The study concluded that the democratic leadership style led to the most productive outcomes. As such, multiple organizations and institutions have since supported this type of leadership.

In the 1950s, the US Armed Forces carried out a series of studies at a non-commissioned officer school in Fort Ord, California to assess leadership qualities amongst its members. The program, called Task NCO, was led by Dr. Paul Hood, a research psychologist and task leader for the US Army’s Human Resources Research Office. Learning of this program, Scouters from the Monterey Bay Area Council designed the “White Stag” program--a junior leadership training experience with the competencies or skills identified in Dr. Hood’s experiments. This program was later popularized across all chapters of the Boy Scouts of America.

Following this trend, several theories on leadership were born not only because of general interest, but also in response to several ethical crises affecting name-brand organizations in the US. Notably, James McGregor Burns and Bernard Bass introduced and described the transformational leadership style, which helped encourage followers to be more proactive in making decisions. This development caused experts to expand the definition of leadership to embrace a wider range of individuals.

Although numerous scholars have different theories on leadership, many of them generally agree that everyone has beliefs and assumptions about the qualities of effective leadership. These thoughts are shaped by their life experiences, personal preferences, exposure to literature, and other socio-cultural factors. In other words, the concept of leadership has been subjective, meaning that under various circumstances, anyone is capable of being a leader.

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