

Leadership Beyond Leaders and Followers

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Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.

It is often said that there are as many different definitions of leadership as there are people attempting to define it. There's more than a grain of truth to that. So let's test this theory out, but with a twist. I will present half a dozen definitions of leadership. Your job is to discern what is the *same* about them (other than the obvious fact that they are all attempts to define the same concept).

1. "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., Sage, 2004).
2. "Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader and shared by the leader and . . . followers" (John W. Gardner, *On Leadership*, Free Press, 1989).
3. "Leadership can be defined as the nature of the influencing process—and its resultant outcomes—that occurs between a leader and followers and how this influencing process is explained by the leader's dispositional characteristics and behaviors, follower perceptions, and attributions of the leader" (John Antonakis, Anna T. Cianciolo, and

Robert J. Sternberg, *The Nature of Leadership*, Sage, 2004).

4. "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purpose" (Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*, Praeger, 1991).
5. Leadership is "a process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of some task" (Martin M. Chemers, *An Integrative Theory of Leadership*, Erlbaum, 1997).
6. "[D]efining effective leadership as successful influence by the leader that results in the attainment of goals by the influenced followers . . . is particularly useful" (Bernard M. Bass, *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 3rd ed., Free Press, 1990).

OK, pencils down. What did you come up with that is the same about these definitions? If you said all of them talk about how some individual or group of individuals (usually a leader or leaders) influences some other group (usually followers), give yourself a gold star. In fact, when one looks at definitions of leadership in this light, one is struck by how *similar* they all are.

This similarity points to the idea that whatever else it may be about, leadership as it is usually defined is

fundamentally about leaders and followers and the influence process by which they achieve common goals. In other words, such definitions conceive of leadership as being so deeply related to leaders and followers that the influence relation between leaders and followers *is leadership*.

This is a problem. The world is changing in ways that make this concept of leadership much too narrow to work well in the future. This basic idea that *leadership is influence* assumes that there is some person (the leader) who is capable of generating more influence toward others (the followers) than others generate toward him or her. But increasingly, people are working in contexts in which that asymmetrical influence relationship is absent.

Such contexts include, for example, a self-managed team of professionals, a family in which the parents are aging and the children are grownups in their own right, a crossfunctional task force in which several functional leaders are expected to share leadership, a community coalition comprising peers from different organizations and walks of life, and a group of friends trying to plan a vacation together.

Sometimes such contexts form when all the members of a group are genuinely peers. For example, a project team of scientists representing different disciplines trying to solve the same public health problem may be expected to work through dialogue and consensus. At other times such contexts are created when members of the group with more influence deliberately tamp down that influence because they wish to work collaboratively with the group. This can happen, for example, on a professional services team whose formal leader decides to share leadership by reducing the influence that comes along with the formal title.

In general such situations feature a group of people who are equals in the sense that everyone has about the same amount of influence as everyone else. In such groups there is no clear leader—no one with marked asymmetrical influence. And of course with no leader, there are no followers either.

But does that mean there is no *leadership*? Surely, even without leaders and followers, people who work together still need what leadership provides. If people are going to learn to work together in increasingly interdependent and collaborative ways, *leaderless* cannot mean *without leadership*.

LOOKING AT OUTCOMES

These peerlike and collaborative situations deserve more attention from those of us who aspire to understand and develop leadership. We need to be able to frame leadership without automatically starting with the concept of a leader and followers in an asymmetrical influence relationship. We need some ways to think about leadership beyond leaders and followers. Some of my colleagues and I at CCL have been thinking about leadership this way by framing it in terms of its *outcomes*: leadership is about producing agreement on *direction*, a framework for *alignment*, and a sense of *commitment* to the collective work. (For more on CCL's work in this area, see the article "Direction, Alignment, Commitment: Toward a More Integrative Ontology of Leadership," in the December 2008 Year in Review issue of *Leadership Quarterly*.) So whenever people working together produce direction, alignment, and commitment, we say leadership has happened—even if there was no leader. Instead of asking, How do leaders influence followers? we have been asking, How do people with shared work produce direction, alignment, and commitment?

A lot is already known about how people produce direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) through the influence of a leader. What is less clear is how people produce DAC when there is no leader. We want to understand better how it can work—how people can accomplish their shared goals when no one is in charge.

This is where thinking about leadership in terms of its outcomes is helpful. When thinking about leadership as DAC, one need not tie leadership to any particular process, including the influence process. Whatever process (or processes) a group, team,

organization, family, or community uses to produce DAC is a leadership process. Leaders and followers may be involved, or they may not be. With an outcome perspective, leadership is no longer fundamentally about leaders and followers; rather, it is fundamentally about how people produce DAC. Instead of being confined to understanding how leaders influence followers, we are all invited to think about leadership in the widest possible set of contexts—not just leaders and followers but also peers and friends, colleagues and partners, competitors and rivals, even antagonists and enemies.

This could be a bad thing.

Thinking about leadership this way could lead to seeing leadership everywhere and making everything leadership.

The danger is that if everything is leadership, nothing is. So we need to be careful to make sure that we learn to identify just those processes that really are intended to produce DAC, and limit our idea of leadership to those processes.

Limiting our idea of leadership to intended outcomes acknowledges the fact that people working together can't just accidentally drift into getting something done. They need to agree first of all on just what it is they're trying to do—their shared direction. They also need to get people organized somehow to do it—they need alignment. And they need people in the group to be committed enough that they are willing to work hard when needed. In other words, for leadership to be present, people working together must intend to produce DAC. Then the processes they engage in to fulfill that intention are leadership processes.

PEER CONTEXT

Maybe this sounds radical, but in fact almost everybody has engaged in leadership in this sense without even thinking about it. Take, for example, a group of friends deciding how to spend the evening. Because they are friends, even if they are not strictly peers from some external perspective, from within their friendship they *want* to treat one another as peers. Given this peer context, how do they decide what to do?

They talk or argue. People throw out suggestions. Others react. "Let's go to that new Vietnamese restaurant," someone says. "I heard it's very expensive," another says. "We could go to the watercolor show first and talk about where to eat while we're there," says a third person. And so it goes: suggestion, disagreement, and compromise, going along. By some mostly unconscious process that no one is paying much attention to, the group gradually comes to some kind of consensus. They produce a direction for the evening; they make arrangements; in the best case, everyone is enthusiastic about the outcome. They get the same kind of results (though not necessarily the same decisions) they might have gotten if one of them had assumed a leader role and persuaded the group what to do.

BIGGER PICTURE

Thinking about leadership in this kind of collaborative context means understanding how "talking about what to do" can be a *leadership* process no less important than the process of a leader influencing followers.

Thinking this way encourages us to ask, Which beliefs do people need to hold and what specific practices do they need to engage in to produce direction, alignment, and commitment without a leader?

By reframing how we think about leadership from a leader-follower influence process to a DAC-producing process (which may include a leader-follower process), we can create a bigger picture of leadership that includes useful ways—who knows, maybe some useful *new* ways—for people to work together effectively.

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