



ARE YOU USING THE LEADERSHIP EQUATION TO GET AHEAD?

Using the leadership equation to get ahead

1. Which few of your leadership attributes would others say have greatest impact on outcomes? How does this compare with the list you made for yourself?
2. What about specific 'leader' behaviours? Which do you find seem to get greatest traction and which are less effective, even counter-productive? Again, how do your perceptions compare with colleagues?
3. What type of 'followers' do you most like leading? Interestingly, studies have shown that the most effective followers display behaviours pretty close to good leadership behaviours. So, when things are going well, do you find that you influence others (leading them) and are sometimes/often also influenced (being lead) by them?
4. In which contexts do you find it easiest to lead? What do you feel contributes to your success in those conditions?
5. In which contexts do you find it most challenging to exercise leadership? What aspects cause the challenges? Can the leadership formula suggest more productive ways forward?

Leadership is difficult to define

Leadership research has, literally, been an item of interest for thousands of years. Yet, rather than seeing a convergence in perspectives coming from recent research, the field is probably more divided than ever before.

A great variety of authors who have written on the topic have variously described leadership using adjectives such as elusive and complex. Despite (or perhaps because of) spending decades researching leadership, Professor John Antonakis of Lausanne University wonders if it is possible to define leadership at all. He said, "Leadership is easy to identify in situ; however, it is difficult to define precisely. Given the complex nature of leadership, a specific definition of leadership does not exist and might never be found".

Looking at leadership

One of the striking features of leadership research over the centuries is the overwhelming focus on 'the leader'. While this may not appear odd, take a step back and reflect for yourself on any previous instance where leadership was being exercised. If you didn't think of a leadership instance, please do so before proceeding.

There was, undoubtedly, at least one leader in your recollection. Okay, no points for the obvious. But, did you spot anything else? Aha – there were others (or at least one other) too. The followers, yes! And that's it? Probe a little deeper – you'll find there was more to leading in your chosen vignette.

Hopefully it didn't take you too long to recognise that your leadership recollection also included a context. The leading took place at particular time, in a particular place and with a particular range of variables associated with the context. For example, stepping up and addressing the team when the market took a down-turn and results were below expectation. Some of the many factors in play would include amount of time the team had worked together, seriousness of problem, condition of the market, what competitors were doing, other things that happened recently etc. Context is important.

What is most important in leadership research?

Hopefully it's now very obvious that focusing only on leaders is fatally flawed, because that approach ignores two of the three variables involved in leadership! But, that is what many leadership and management researchers have necessarily done in the past and continue to do today.

'How so?' you might be wondering. Here's how it happens. For example, to derive a set of leadership attributes in an organisation or an industry sector, people are asked to check those attributes that

identified leaders display. It would be unusual to consider who the followers were when responding, and even less so to think about the context in which the leadership was occurring. Attribute researchers are after that golden handful of common, inherent factors that 'the leaders' are perceived to possess.

Interestingly, this search for universal leader traits was used during World War II to try and quickly identify the right people to be leaders. However, it didn't prove particularly effective – in some cases, flipping a coin might have been more scientific. First, researchers found dozens of traits – and most leaders didn't have all the traits. More important, researchers were unable to show how identified traits translated consistently into good leadership across contexts. So, there was obviously more to leadership than was being 'explained' by the traits approach.

To add to the complexity, researchers have also recently found that different cultures place different emphasis (value) on individual leadership traits. While there are a few universal positives and negatives, many more of the traits in leadership lists are 'culturally contingent'. What some cultures value in their leaders, other cultures despise. Why would anyone want to follow an attributes approach to leadership, other than having a neat list to post on a wall (or the company website)?

Looking to the leadership equation for greater success

The leadership equation involves the leader as well as those who follow (at a particular time) and the context in which the leadership is occurring. Leaders are well advised to pay careful attention to their followers. It is helpful to have a good understanding of people, along with a healthy dose of self-awareness about how one's own style influences others to act. Scrutiny shows that leadership research has only really started doing this in the past couple of decades.

The context in which the leading and following occurs is also important. Vitality, contexts change. Those changes often impact the very nature of leading and following, especially if you recall that leading is about influencing others towards a common goal. For example, managerial authority may not vary when most contexts change, but willingness to follow (rather comply with authority) might be quite different in changed conditions.

Highlighting the complexity of leadership

The leadership equation reminds us that there is more to leading than the leader. It also gives us another clue as to why leadership definitions are so elusive. It is a non-linear equation. Outputs of the non-linear system are not directly proportional to the inputs! Although some desire a neat prescription, leadership is non-linear. Success needs careful consideration of all three parts of the equation.