

# CHANGING THE FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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When you think about effective leadership you typically conceive of leadership in terms of inspiration and innovation; inspirational, because leadership is about influencing people to do things you want them to do, willingly and well; innovative, because leadership is about change and risk-taking. There seems little contention in such a conception of effective leadership. However, there is growing frustration in the management literature with such a conception of leadership, expressed in personal attribute and stylistic terms. This paper examines the root of that frustration and introduces an alternative framework conceived around leadership as an activity: adaptive leadership. Whilst adaptive leadership was originally developed as a response to the tough social and environmental problems we increasingly face, the nature of the construction industry is such that similar features now apply. A case is developed for a change, in the framework for leadership in the construction industry.

Keywords: adaptive leadership, authority, construction management, leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Bennis (2007: 2) leadership "... has never mattered more than it does now." This is in the broadest context of the 'truly important questions' we face as a society, and variously referred to as 'real leadership' (Williams, 2005), 'authentic leadership' (George, 2003) and/or 'adaptive leadership' (Heifetz, 2004). This paper uses the term 'adaptive leadership'. Adaptive leadership is the kind of leadership that helps people, organisations and societies face up to their truly important challenges - the wicked, intractable, tough challenges that define our human condition. That is some mantle!

Hardly surprising, then, that leadership has become such a potent focus of attention in almost every field of human endeavour, from politics to the military, from psychology to sociology. It has become perhaps most significantly a particular, if not a primary, focus for research in the context of management. The management literature abounds in theories of leadership, studies of leaders, and advice on how to develop leadership qualities (see, for example, *The Leadership Quarterly*, an international journal of political, social and behavioural science, published in affiliation with the International Leadership Association: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua>).

In our own field of construction management research, there is now an established series of speciality conferences on leadership in construction (Songer et al 2006), a CIB Technical Group on Leadership in Construction (CIB TG64), a targeted scholarly journal (*Leadership and Management in Engineering*, see <http://scitation.aip.org/leo/>), and an emerging literature base specific to the topic. Leadership has been highlighted

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as providing one of the key, fundamental drivers and critical/predictive competencies for effective project management performance (Dainty et al 2006). There are growing calls for leadership skills to be more explicitly included in our educational programs (Kumar and Hsiao 2007, Hay and Hodgkinson 2006).

Despite such grand ambition for leadership at its broadest level, the sheer volume of empirical attention given to leadership in the management context, and the significance afforded to leadership in construction management practice, there remains a dogged discontent with what has been achieved. Hackman and Wageman (2007: 43) maintain that "For all the research that has been conducted on the topic of leadership, the field remains curiously unformed." It is certainly possible to categorise the field given a particular perspective, but there is no coherence between the different perspectives that are possible. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003:359) concede that leadership may be no more than "... a label for a variety of more or less related issues ...". Certainly there is a demonstrable lack of basic canons, and in reality there is not even an accepted definition of leadership (Goethals et al 2004). In their review of the literature considering the adoption of leadership theories in construction, Chan and Cooper (2007: 501) describe the development as "... somewhat primitive ...".

From the grand mantle, we sink to an apparent state of confusion and conceptual weakness. Or do we? Notwithstanding the broad spectrum of discontent, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003:362) "... doubt that a common definition of leadership is practically possible, would not be very helpful if it were, does not hit the target, and may also obstruct new ideas and interesting ways of thinking." Why should the same theory of leadership obtain for very different situations and from very different perspectives? The idea of multi-level analysis, originally developed for organisational research by Dansereau et al (1984), provides a particularly robust analytical framework in this regard. Unfortunately, a comprehensive review of the principal leadership theories by Yammarino et al (2005) revealed that "... relatively few studies (about 9%) in any of the areas of leadership research that were reviewed had addressed levels of analysis issues appropriately in theory, measurement, data analysis, and inference drawing." (Yammarino and Dansereau, 2008:136).

Another possibility has been raised by Hackman and Wageman (2007:43), that "... leadership scholars over the years may have been asking questions that have no general answers, thereby adding complexity but not clarity to our understanding." They go on to counter several key drivers of research in leadership, by reposing the underlying question around something more tractable. For example, the question of whether leaders make a difference is countered with a question about the conditions under which leadership matters. The question of what should be taught in leadership courses is countered with how leaders can be helped to learn. This simple rephrasing of key questions makes a significant difference to the knowledge about leadership that would be produced, specifically the production of knowledge that is potentially more "... interesting, useful and cumulative." (Hackman and Wageman, 2007:43).

What the most recent leadership literature appears to be suggesting is that, contrary to the supposed general discontent, the many and various theories of leadership do have the potential to collectively contribute to our understanding of leadership as being heterogeneous, multi-level, possibly symbolic, socio-cultural, temporal, and so on, and so on. This is to say, that the research assumptions about leadership, the ambiguity of what may or may not constitute leadership, and most critically perhaps the underlying values that frame our engagement and motivate our interests, are

significant factors that change not just perspective, but the phenomenon itself. It highlights the critical need to deal with questions of ontology, where the 'background' of assumptions, intentions and values should not be left unchallenged or poorly articulated. They most certainly must not be taken for granted.

Within the context of a largely scientific and quantitative research discipline, the holding of ostensibly incongruent theories within the same domain might appear overly, and uncomfortably, liberal. But at the same time, in the undeniable and unavoidable absence of unambiguous data, the counter question must also arise: "... does leadership [even] exist, that is, beyond attributions or discourse (language use)?" (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003:363). Is leadership no more than a conceptual construct? This paper seeks to explore yet another theory of leadership. It does so in order to reframe a conception of leadership specific to the construction industry. The need for such a reframing stems primarily from a desire to teach leadership more explicitly within an undergraduate degree in construction management and property. This is in line with Hay and Hodgkinson (2006:144) who suggest that "... one way to tackle this thorny issue of teaching leadership may be to rethink leadership or put differently, to conceptualise leadership in a way that is more helpful to our attempts to teach leadership." They go on to suggest that the current "... dominant leadership theories may conceptualise leadership in ways that are of limited help to management educators." (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006:145).

## **TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP**

According to Ford and Lawler (2007: 409) traditional leadership theories "... are characterised by the rationalist, [sic] perspective that seeks to distil the essence of leadership to identify the composite qualities/behaviours/competencies, which together constitute "leadership". In the main, these approaches seek to identify and define what "leadership" is in universal terms." These qualities, behaviours, and competencies are generally referred to as traits. A significant proportion of leadership studies, particularly to begin with, have been targeted at what traits people most often associate with leadership. The charismatic and inspirational leader, for example, with heroic fortitude is often cast as the quintessential leader. Having identified a set of appropriate traits, it was argued, there would be the basis for competency development training, meaning that leadership could be taught.

The early assumption that leadership is "... a general personal trait independent of the context in which the leadership was performed ..." has been generally discredited (Vroom and Jago, 2007:18). It became clear early in the piece that "... an adequate analysis of leadership involves not only a study of leaders, but also of situations." (Stogdill, 1948:65). As Yukl (2006) and others argue, this should not negate the investigation of traits per se, but rather that leadership represents a complex of different combinations of traits, "... including cognitive capacities, personality or dispositional qualities, motives and values, problem-solving skills, social capacities, and tacit knowledge ..." (Zaccaro, 2007:12). However, from the early challenge of leadership traits there did emerge a deeper consideration of the situation parameters within which leadership takes place.

The switch in attention within leadership research from the individual to the social, reflected a broader scientific/philosophical switch from the power of the individual actor to determine outcomes (the local 'push'), to the power of social forces to accommodate particular activities (the environmental 'pull'). The argument was that social forces "... selected people for positions of leadership and shaped their behaviour

to coincide with social interests." (Vroom and Jago, 2007:19). Pure situational theory (or 'contingent theory') maintains that the attributes of an individual leader in fact may have no impact on their effectiveness as a leader. "Leadership is associated with a set of myths reinforcing a social construction of meaning which legitimates leadership role occupants, provides belief in potential mobility for those not in leadership roles, and attributes social causality to leadership roles, thereby providing a belief in the effectiveness of individual control." (Pfeffer, 1977:111). The more general disposition for so-called 'situationalists', following Hersey et al (2001), was to align a set of leadership traits (each set generally termed a leadership 'style'), with a given set of situations. Situations were described both in terms of the organisational (power) structures within which different leaders have to operate, and the 'maturity' (competency and commitment) of the people a leader must influence.

The situationalist framework had incredible impact on leadership research, not least because it was simple to understand and ostensibly simple to teach and apply. More substantially, the focus on situation first highlighted the significance of how leaders deal with the people being influenced: the 'followers'. Leadership research became largely about how leaders might effect change in their followers by changing how they transact with each other and/or by transforming the collective behaviour. As Jooste (2004:221) explains in the context of nursing, "Transformational leadership is an empowering leadership style ..." built around charisma, inspiration, vision, and an array of other behavioural devices. But once again, as Berry and Cartwright (2000:344) observe, "... we see that the ontology was realist and the epistemology was functionalist ... The criterion of effectiveness is still the functional effectiveness of the leader's behaviour." When the leader is still positioned at the centre of the framework, there is always potential for the kinds of systemic abuse of that position we see emerging in cases such as Enron, WorldCom and Tyco, as well as politically with the War in Iraq, Zimbabwe and Burma. The 'empowering leadership style' might equally be viewed as a controlling, manipulative seduction of followers by their leaders. Popper (2004:109) states: "Although inclusion of the followers in the discussion and research on leadership is a very important conceptual development, this approach still reveals prevalent inherent biases with regard to the leadership phenomenon in general and the figure of leaders in particular."

The postmodernist turn has prompted a different engagement with the leader-follower relationship than those based on individual agency, or a 'subject-object' view of the relationship (Uhl-Bien, 2006:661). The postmodernist leadership framework is based on relational dynamics as the social constructions that emerge as effective leadership is developed, or a hermeneutic view of relationship. In the hermeneutic view the leader-follower relationship is an emergent property of circumstances, like any other relationship, and without privileging the leader role over all others. "Just as there are different types of relationships friendship, romantic love, parent-child relations, etc. and there are situations and cultural and mental contexts that influence the dynamics of relationships, so it is with leadership." (Popper, 2004:118). The study of leadership within this framework is a study of the changes in the circumstances that enable leadership relationships to exist (and change from time to time). "In this way, it moves leadership beyond a focus on simply getting alignment (and productivity) or a manager's view of what is productive, to a consideration of how leadership arises through the interactions and negotiation of social order among organizational members." (Uhl-Bien, 2006:672).

Thus, the more recent theories of leadership tend to reject the idea that "leadership is a summation of the qualities, behaviors [sic], or situational responses of individuals in a position of authority at the head of organizations." (Fairholm, 2004:579). Rather, they take the hermeneutic view that relationships inescapably are both reciprocal and emergent. Reciprocal in the sense that all actors party to a leadership situation contribute in a direct way to the leader-follower relationship. Roles and responsibilities are most typically conferred by the followers on the leaders rather than being usurped by the leaders themselves. "A leader earns influence by adjusting to the expectations of followers." (Heifetz, 1994:17). Followers are then the true principals and leaders become the agents. Emergent in the sense that leadership has no pre-ordained (objectivist) 'essence'. Rather, in Polanyi's sense of the tacit (Polanyi, 1966), leadership casts shadows and leaves trails (a Gestalt) we can investigate and interrogate, but it is disrupted and displaced when the focus of awareness is directed to it.

## **ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP**

Various approaches are now being developed to reframe leadership studies in order to integrate both skills (practical action) and dispositions (values and attitudes) as phenomenological processes. For example, Sternberg (2008), Ford and Lawler (2007), Wood (2005) and Popper (2004). This paper explores the framework of adaptive leadership presented by Heifetz and others (Williams 2005, Kahane 2004, Heifetz 1994). Adaptive leadership can be said to provide a very particular prescription of leadership, one that aims to take into account both the reciprocity of leadership relationships and their emergent qualities. It has been developed in the specific context of adaptive work:

"Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior [sic]. The exposure and orchestration of conflict internal contradictions within individuals and constituencies provide the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways." (Heifetz 1994:22).

Within the context of adaptive work the focus of leadership changes. Consider, as Heifetz (1994: 14) proposes, "... the differences in behavior [sic] when people operate with the idea that "leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader's vision" versus "leadership means influencing the community to face its problems."" In the first case, the focus is on the power and influence of the leader. In the second case the focus is on the capacity of a community to face tough problems. There is a change in values from the power and influence of an individual to the mobilisation and capacity of a community. This change in focus is central to adaptive leadership, because it places leadership absolutely as something people do (an activity) to improve the human condition (values). In this way it transcends the individual, allowing a plethora of ways in which to leadership might be constituted [leadership through individual change]. In this way it provides for leadership to be exercised from multiple points in a social/organisational structure, meaning leadership can be exercised by anyone, in any position [leadership without authority]. In this way it recognises that different skill-sets will be required in different situations, placing emphasis on working in groups and as communities [leadership demands presence]. In this way leadership is intentional, the activity has a purpose, and the effectiveness of leadership can be evaluated directly against that purpose [leadership with value].

### **Leadership through individual change**

Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behaviour. This is fundamental to the notion of adaptive leadership, and is impossible without change to the individual. We are dealing with a problem challenge that is so complex that technical analysis alone is insufficient, previous solutions do not apply directly, and a new mode of operating is called for. New modes of operating call not merely for a change in routine or a re-jigging of existing expertise, but for a change in the value system of the people involved: a change of heart not hat. That of course is no small requirement, but it lies at the foundation of authentic leadership and provides a prominent distinction for the (adaptive) leadership being described.

This is not to prescribe how the value systems of participants will be changed, or in what ways. Simply that intractable problems (by definition) are not susceptible to the prevailing paradigm. If you have to change the paradigm, you have to challenge the taken-for-granted knowledge, and that means changing values, beliefs or behaviour. Adaptive leadership makes individual change essential to the process and claims that individuals can, indeed make a difference. The work of the trait theorists contributes much to the mechanics of individual change, but adaptive leadership differs because it utilises traits for a purpose (value) rather than making traits the focus for their own sake. For example, influence can be important, but it is what is achieved through the exercise of that influence that is of value as an outcome, not the influence itself. Influence may or may not be the only way for leadership to achieve a given outcome.

### **Leadership without authority**

Without doubt the most difficult conceptual shift to achieve, given its primacy in current conceptions of leadership, is to accept that leadership can be exercised without authority. Most people absolutely presume leadership and authority go hand in hand. Authority can certainly play a critical role in leadership in certain situations, but it is by no means sufficient in itself, and indeed it is more often merely a constraint. The activity of leadership is about mobilising people in a whole-hearted sense, and cannot often be achieved through subjugation or directives alone.

Authority is more like a social contract, where in exchange for the powers invested in them, those with authority "... serve as repositories for our worries and aspirations ..." (Heifetz, 1994: 69). And the contract goes further, in that authority is also deemed to be responsible for the outcomes. This promotes a strong tendency for those without authority to excuse themselves from the hard personal work required (to challenge personal belief and value systems, to remain present, to share the risks and responsibilities for outcomes, etc.). In this way, whilst authority brings a particular suite of resources that in certain situations might be critical, authority is also (and perhaps more often) a potent excuse for inaction and work avoidance.

The transactional theorists contributed the basic notion that authority is a reciprocal relationship, but they failed to articulate the darker side of that dependency acting as a decoy. When people subscribe to an authority there is always the danger that the tasks they are given are either peripheral or unrelated to the fundamental problem they face.

### **Leadership demands presence**

Working in a group or as part of a community is the unavoidable consequence of seeing leadership as an activity that is focussed on mobilising communities to face tough problems. Communities of people are odd collections. This is just as well, give that teams are most effective when they comprise a range of types and roles (Belbin

2004). But all types are never required at the same time, to the same extent. The idea of presence refers to a key factor in effective leadership, which is the extent to which an individual can maintain connection with the activities. The important consideration is the extent to which attention is being directed (present) to the activities. If groups demand a variety of inputs, then those best placed to provide such inputs need to monitor, recognise and take appropriate action when the need arises. Being present, in all its manifestations, ensures that the fabric of the activity sustains some contiguity.

The situational theorists, coupled with the contingency approach, advocated for variety and the need for different leadership approaches in different circumstances. Having identified a range of diagnostic tools and the leadership styles that might best suit different situations, situational research supports presencing in a very direct way. It indicates the particular types of input required in particular circumstances. However, it arrays those input and situation options in a relatively fixed state. Adaptive leadership calls for a more dynamic application of reading the situation and intervening. The notion of presencing affords new possibilities to the diagnostic tools and leadership styles already developed.

### **Leadership with value**

When leadership is understood as an activity that seeks to address a challenging problem, it renders the focus of that activity absolutely explicit. It is no longer about the transaction of power and influence between individuals, but rather is entirely about the moving forward of the problem at hand. Leadership has a purpose. That purpose is to mobilise the community to face tough problems. Effective leadership is evaluated directly in terms of the progress being made. With purpose comes value.

The vast majority of extant leadership theories are designed to be value-free (Heifetz, 1994: 19). "Our understanding of the phenomenon has been greatly enhanced by studies following this orthodoxy but the dominance of the approach in studies of leadership, focusing on quantitative empirical methods, has resulted in a relative dearth of qualitative approaches. Thus, there is much for us to understand about the leadership process." (Ford and Lawler, 2007: 410). Whilst the traditional theories of leadership all attempt "... to define leadership objectively, without making value judgements." (Heifetz, 1994: 18), they each introduce value-biases implicitly. The most recent theories of prominence are each, in their own way, seeking to make the value systems more overt and considered. Values can never be neutral, but they can (and should) be addressed.

## **WHY IS ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP RELEVANT TO THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?**

In distinguishing leadership, and particularly adaptive leadership, much has been made of the complex problems faced by communities. The conception of adaptive leadership has been developed in direct response to the tough problems people face: the problems that usually don't get solved peacefully (Kahane 2004). This includes communities in the sense of social groups, business organisations and political nations, but it does have a strong social theme. How and why does it relate to the construction industry?

It is the contention of this paper that the structure of the construction industry is changing. Like most industries, construction is abandoning strong, traditional hierarchies in preference for flatter organisational structures and relationships. Most significantly, the organisational structures and relationships are becoming entirely

dynamic. Such an organisational structure simply does not suit leadership by authority. Authority works most effectively through command and control structures, where the authority is vested in one person (a superior/commander) over another (subordinate). Authority then works through a combination of personal standing (personal authority) and legal power to act (official authority). Official authority is rarely sufficient in itself, and is extremely difficult to exercise where the superior-subordinate relationship is not clear cut. Personal authority relies on factors such as experience, skill and personal character, which by their nature are difficult to substitute. Most critically, personal authority is such that it is, and can only be, bestowed upon a person (by the other members of the organisation). Personal authority is not something an individual can develop independently.

Authority is also exercised by, amongst other things, making predictions, providing direction and taking decisions. Another characteristic of the changing construction industry is the increased complexity of the business, social and environmental context within which construction companies now operate. As the context becomes more wickedly dynamic and complex (problems become tougher), so the capacity to make meaningful predictions is reduced. If it is increasingly difficult to make predictions, provide direction and take informed decisions, then a further tenet of authority has been removed in the context of the current construction industry.

## CONCLUSIONS

A frustration with leadership as it is currently conceptualised is emerging in the general management literature (MacBeath 2007, Pawar 2003). There is still a lot of confusion arising from the lack of a coherent definition, the unhelpful conceptions of leadership that still pervade, and the inherent contradiction of value-free description.

In the specific context of construction management, Toor and Ofori (2008) try to clarify the distinction between management and leadership across various levels and from multiple perspectives. They argue that leadership can be distinguished from management in all manner of ways, but that what is required are "... leaders with managerial capabilities and managers with leadership qualities." (Toor and Ofori 2008: 69). There is a tendency to see leadership as an extension or complement to management in such a way that leadership once more becomes subsumed within a broader compass of effective management. The attempt of some to distinguish leadership more explicitly from management also appears to be of limited use, because the distinctions still fail to acknowledge that they are not value-free conceptions. A more effective distinction is possible when leadership is conceived in terms of a process of action. Then, as Heifetz has done with such rigour and depth, it is possible to distinguish adaptive leadership in meaningful waysways in which to constitute a leader [leadership through individual change], to be exercised by anyone [leadership without authority], working in groups and as communities [leadership demands presence], and with purpose [leadership with value]. Recognising leadership as an activity in this way provides for a clear engagement with the kind of adaptive work we so often now encounter.

The fact that adaptive leadership was conceived in order to engage particularly in tough social and environmental problems does not negate its application to the construction management industry. Changing organisational structure and the dynamics of change make leadership by authority increasingly difficult and inappropriate. The changing demographics in the industry, tied with moves to recognise communities of practice, are all promoting a changing framework for

leadership in the construction industry. At its core, and in any case, the construction process is very much about social interaction and community dynamics. Having an alternative framework and some imperative to change to that framework is good, but amounts to little if the change in attitudes and approaches can not be taught. The desire to teach leadership as part of an undergraduate degree program in construction and property management provided the original impetus to change the framework for leadership in the construction industry. There is not space in the current paper to describe and explore the teaching initiative that emerged from this reframing in detail. But the author has taught a course based around adaptive leadership to 140 first-year construction management and property students in 2007. That exercise demonstrated quite clearly the viability of teaching adaptive leadership competencies in such a context.

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