

## **Visualizing Leadership from the Roots Up: Where are We Now, and What Do We Need to Grow Stronger?**

Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen  
Chair of Graduate Education; Assistant Professor of Education  
Delaware Valley University  
Doylestown, PA 18901

Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen holds an Ed.D. in Reading/Language Arts from Widener University. She spent nearly twenty-five years as an English teacher in Pennsylvania public schools, during which time she spent three months as an exchange teacher in Bohodukhiv, Ukraine. For fourteen years, she worked as a teacher preparation educator, Department Chair, Associate Dean, and Interim Dean of the College of Education at Rowan University. Currently, Dr. Jorgensen is teaching in both the master's and doctoral programs and is chairing dissertations of the inaugural cohort of the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Delaware Valley University, Doylestown, PA where she also serves as Chair of Graduate Education. Dr. Jorgensen serves on the Board of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, and on the Editorial Board of *New Jersey English Journal*. At the national level, Dr. Jorgensen serves as a Lead Reviewer for NCTE/CAEP as part of the accrediting process of English Education programs.

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### **Introduction**

For those called to leadership positions, the challenges are many. Throughout my career in a variety of leadership positions including department chair, associate dean and interim dean of a large college at a public university and as a chair at a private university, I have discovered that knowing the roots of my personal leadership philosophy helps me to recognize that what I believe is not the only thing that drives the leadership plan wherever I am working. While there is often a single leader in the hierarchical sense of department, school or college, or institution, leadership grows from the vision of all working together to move a mission forward. Leadership is a mantle that is often worn by many who accept a variety of roles, and people in leadership positions are wise to understand that their own perspective may be one of many that exist in the varied contexts of any institution. From very small to very large, teams must often be formed to get things done.

The theories and interpretations of leadership theory are myriad, and the slants each can take present us with interesting perspectives well worth exploring. No single paper or even book discusses all of them. In fact, as each of us spends time visualizing leadership in our own institutions and over time, we will find that iterations not yet discovered tend to emerge. In my own mind, my vision of leadership takes shape as a tree. Strong and healthy, that metaphorical tree will grow from a deep and broad root system, into a solid trunk that reaches upward and outward, spreading branches that represent many points of view and perspectives from which things get done giving rise to leaves that will bloom, vital and strong. s will grow as they should and the leaves will bloom, vital and strong.

Envision your own leadership situation. You are not alone as the leader even if you are "in charge." In order to have your organization grow and thrive rather than wither and struggle, it is wise to know well the leadership theories that are the roots of your organization. Then, you must envision a trunk that is solidly formed from the mission and vision of the organization. Sometimes, out of the mission and vision, many branches will grow, each of which will require specific leadership skills so that the desired outcomes can be achieved. Often, the vision and mission are institutional and you must work with those. Sometimes, however, we can have a much smaller group within an organization that has its own unique vision and mission. For example, your college or university may have an overarching

mission and vision that you are required to use as a guide for policy and decision-making. You may, however, have a school or college mission or vision that, while it supports the larger institutional mission and vision, also has a uniqueness of its own. The overarching institutional tree may actually encompass so much that it becomes a visual representation, but may actually make getting anything done quite difficult. This means that the school/college and departmental trees become even more important from the standpoint of day-to-day operational leadership. You have the opportunity to visualize leadership in a way that will enable growth and productivity in a positive, vibrant community.

Visualize the roots of your leadership tree as those leadership theories which you or others in your organization tacitly agree exist. These are respected and provide a foundation for the discussion of leadership platforms. They form strong roots out of which can grow mission and vision statements reflective of the people in the organization. Among those roots, we should find the leadership theories our constituents would identify as those they wish to see in their leaders. Sometimes, we are going to need to think about how we can weave those into our mission and vision even though they are not our personally espoused leadership styles. What we want and what we need are sometimes different.

As a starting point, ask yourself whether you lead alone or as part of one team or many teams. Leadership of one can be solitary and lonely, but it does have the advantage of fewer different roots, branches, and leaves to balance. Whether yours is a leadership of one or leadership of many, identify and reflect upon the core elements of the leadership theories, psychology, and traits that exist in your organization. The roots from which the vision and mission grow must be strong, and it helps if they are based on tested premises. Leadership that grows out of this solid base can allow for ideas that lead to innovation and transformation. Where we are contributes to what we can do to become stronger.

### **Leadership theories, traits, and styles**

Sometimes it seems that everyone has a definition of leadership from which to work in an organization. While it would be nice to believe that everyone works from the same base, that is unlikely to be true. In fact, multiple terms apply to each leader at various times and in various situations. Often leadership changes in accordance with the context in which it must be used. What is the nature of leadership? Horne (xxxx) describes the most basic human instance of leadership as two individuals who must accomplish some task. In the process, one might very well defer to the other for any number of reasons. "One person takes command or leadership. Of course, a person may lead in some areas and not in others..." (p.3). Horne goes on to discuss the evolution of leadership from Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates to Hobbes, Rousseau and more recent political leaders. Suffice it to say that, "[R]oles often have cycles, especially, if they are dictated by need. As the task changes, so may the nature of leadership and what it has to do. In true democracies, be it countries or organizations, leaders are elected by the people and usually they have term limits" (Horne, p. 11). In educational organizations, we will often find that our leaders are NOT elected, but rather are appointed or emerge because of expertise.

Begin your analysis of what your leadership tree looks like by thinking about the roots that have grown out of a variety of theories, traits, and styles. These are terms that have multiple dimensions, so be aware of the source definition you want to use. Without that source definition, everyone will be working from a deficit mindset because they do not know what others at the table believe. There is more than one "root" growing into the vision and mission of the group or institution. The best (or authentic) leaders have the ability to "...adapt [their] behaviours based on the context and people they are interacting with" (Define Leadership Styles, p. 1).

For purposes of this paper, focus on a group of theories that demonstrate how leadership has been perceived over a long period of time. You will need to place some of these theories as very strong roots on your leadership tree. Cutler (2014) looks at these theories as ones every inspirational leader knows and understands even if the theory has given way to something newer or something that feels

more personally appropriate. He lists: great man theory; trait theory; behavioural theory; situational leadership; functional leadership; relationship theory” (p. 6).

Many of us have at least a passing familiarity with Thomas Carlyle’s Great Man Theory. Carlyle, a historian, put forth the idea that leaders are born. “They have inbred qualities that come to the fore when their leadership destiny unfolds” (Cutler, 2014, p. 6). Women and those from the lower classes need not apply in the context of this theory which, while primarily political at its inception, became a long-held belief about who could be a leader. Out of this argument of whether great leaders are born or made came efforts to categorize those traits and skills necessary for leadership. The Trait theory looks at a variety of traits and skills present in successful leaders and then seeks those traits in individuals so that they can be placed in leadership positions. Stogdill (1974) identified a set of thirteen traits and nine skills as required in a leader. Others (Lord, De-Vader, & Alliger (1986); Kirkpatrick & Locke (1991); Bennis (1998); Daft (1999), and Adair (2009) ) have differing thoughts on what is a quality of a good leader. In the case of Lord, et al., they identified *masculinity* as a key quality. The limitations of Trait Theory are obvious: people do not agree on what qualities are crucial to strong leadership and Trait Theory suggests that the qualities identified, whatever they are, are inherent and not developed.

Here, I would like to interject an interesting addition the identifying leadership qualities. Stephen Cashman, my doctoral candidate at Delaware Valley University, is studying the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and the Teacher Change Agent Scale (TCAS) to determine how narcissistic personality traits correlate with teacher change agency. His work became more interesting as the media seem to have a penchant for highlighting President Trump’s Narcissistic personality traits. What Cashman has determined in preliminary findings is that there can be very positive connotations to narcissistic personality traits that are often identified solely in a negative way. Some of the traits identified by Stogdill (1974) and the others cited earlier are quite similar to traits of the NPI. Cashman’s work seeks to demonstrate that traits often identified as negative can, in certain environments, contribute to leadership in very positive ways. In fact, some of what Cashman is discovering in the NPI as traits often perceived as negative, align nicely with the desired leadership styles of Hersey and Blanchard (1969). They cite qualities such as Directive and Achievement-oriented (see Cutler, 2014, p. 16) which align nicely with Authority in the NPI. Teachers surveyed indicate that traits like Authority, Self-Sufficiency, and Superiority should be perceived as positive in the context of leading educational change. Even Exploitativeness can be seen as a positive when it is perceived to be about taking advantage of the talents and skills of those in an organization. The TCAS divides into three areas of expertise: Contextual, Collaborative, and Problem Solving. All are leadership qualities that researchers have found to be identified as positive.

Over time, leadership theories evolved away from the idea that leaders are born with inherent traits that will make them successful leaders. Some of this happened as a result of the inability of those studying leadership to agree on what the actual necessary leadership traits are. Evolution of ideas brought forth the behavioral theory of leadership saying that what leaders do and how they behave towards their followers is a better way to discuss leadership. This brought to the fore the idea that leaders could, indeed be developed because anyone could learn relevant skills. This led to the identification of styles among leaders. Behavioral theory tends to look at those who have become leaders and describes them. It does not explain why these people became leaders and how they respond to the situations they will face.

Situational or contingency theories of leadership emerged. In these models, the focus is on how an identified leader adapts his/her style to the situation. This theory suggests that there is not ONE best style; it must be flexible.

The basic premise of the theory is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership. From this perspective, to be an effective leader requires that an individual adapt his or her style to the demands of different situations. Situational leadership stresses that leadership is

composed of both a directive and a supportive dimension, and each has to be applied appropriately to a given situation. (Northouse, (2004), p. 87)

Additionally, leaders adapt to their followers and can be either task-oriented or relationship-oriented. Wisdom suggests that we should study both leadership and followership.

Adair's Action-centered Leadership model builds on the principle that a leader "achieves a task through individuals working together in a team. Hence, in order to be effective, a leader must meet the needs of the task, the team and the individual" (Cutler, 2014, p. 18). Most often represented as a Venn diagram, this model demonstrates how a leader must work effectively and efficiently in all contexts so that goals are met. Kouzes and Posner (2008) crafted a model titled *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*, summarized as:

1. Model the way
2. Inspire a shared vision
3. Challenge the process
4. Enable others to act
5. Encourage the heart (in Cutler, 2014, pp. 20-21)

In summary, we should take a look at the combination of transactional and transformational leadership as these are two theories or styles that have emerged into prominence. Although the terms *transformational* and *transactional* when applied to leadership are not particularly new, they certainly warrant discussion. Burns (in Northouse) posits that most leadership models can be described as transactional. This is based on the idea that things happen between leaders and followers. Promises are made and sometimes kept; deals are enacted. These transactions occur most often when a successful leader is in place. Transformational leaders are more concerned with the changes that occur within the followers, the changes that raise levels of motivation and morality in both leader and followers. Closely aligned with this is the idea of charismatic leadership (House in Northouse, 2004). Both transformational and charismatic leaders are role models. They "live" the values and beliefs they want followers to adopt. The transformational leader is able to inspire followers to do more than expected. The transformational leader works to develop followers to their maximum potential.

Regardless of the theory or style a leader embraces, there is one thing all have in common: ethics. All leaders and their followers make choices; all respond to situations and stimuli. How they respond is dictated by the rules and principles that guide their decision-making. Sometimes a duty or a rule dictates our decision-making, and we must follow that rule even if we do not agree. Sometimes we are asking the question What is right? and following our own moral guidelines to reflect on the consequences of a leadership decision. Good leadership is ethical leadership that grows from solid roots. "Sound ethical leadership is rooted in respect, service, justice, honesty, and community" (Northouse, 2004, p. 326). If we can have our tree grow from these roots, we can most certainly look to where we are and what we can do to become stronger.

### ***Tree Analogy***

When an arborist plants a tree, he recognizes from the beginning that if the root system fails, the tree will die. When we "plant" the tree that is our leadership vision, we need to know that the taproot can grow downward and thrive because the soil in which it is planted is rich in nutrients and allows for an ample supply of water. Roots will extend radially in every direction from this taproot and the early-forming lateral roots become the structural support of the tree. Therefore, recognize that in an organization, we are going to have roots in different theories and styles. Each person in the organization, whether leader or follower, becomes a root for the growth of the tree of leadership. These roots enable nutrients, water, and oxygen to flow upward to form a solid, sturdy trunk and branches and leaves that become the crown. Where conditions are favorable, roots will grow. Where roots encounter

obstacles, they will find the path of least resistance and grow around the obstacle. Given optimum conditions, the root system will continue to grow and provide structural support for the growing tree. See your vision and mission as the trunk of the tree. Your vision and mission have been informed by the theories and styles and ethics of leaders and followers in your organization. From the roots, through the trunk, filtering upward, branches and leaves will grow. These will be directly connected to the traits and ethics the team embraces. Sometimes there will be a need to prune, but pruning must be undertaken with great care. One cannot, as an effective leader, simply lop off branches without considering the consequences of the action. Visualize where you are now. Identify the roots, the branches and the leaves. Determine what you need to do to grow stronger. What nutrients must you provide? What pruning does need to be done? What is impeding growth? Once you know, move forward.

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