

Leadership theory in context: finding new insights from an older time

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the gap between the context of historical leadership theory and today's students and teachers highlighting the challenge for leadership educators in teaching theory.

Design/methodology/approach – This article draws on the life experience of a 97-year-old woman to illustrate components of two leadership theories and discusses the importance and value of historical context in understanding leadership theory.

Findings – The gap between current leadership educators and historical theory is growing at the same time as the gap widens between leadership educators and current students.

Originality/value – As a young field of study, we still could capture and understand the original contexts of our theories. These contexts are important in illustrating the evolution of leadership theory. We can learn from the past to lead our future.

Keywords Followership, Authentic leadership, Leadership education, Leadership theory

Paper type Viewpoint

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In 2020, amidst a global pandemic and freshly out of my doctoral program, I moved from Greensboro, NC, to Hays, KS, to start a faculty position in the Department of Leadership Studies at Fort Hays State University. I received no campus or city tour since my interview occurred over Zoom. Although I moved some items into my campus office in a deserted building and taught on campus one day a week to a class of seven students seated six feet apart from one another, I mostly worked from home for an academic year. As many did during this time, I binged-watched Netflix, scrolled social media and watched the news constantly for world updates. My husband became my closest daily collaborator, and I mastered Zoom culture. I was finally living back in my home state close to family and saw them literally never.

Yet, due to the unusual circumstances, something very significant happened – I met a new neighbor, friend and mentor. Eleanor was 91 years old at this time and living by herself in the yellow house next door. Her yard includes two rectangles of the most perfect Bermuda grass, and her house is lined with healthy plants and vibrant flowers tended by her daily. I went on daily walks, which made it very easy to cross paths with her doing her yardwork. “Oh, hello!” she’d say as she waved and walked over to strike up a conversation. It’s through the many conversations I’ve had with her over the last six years that I have come to know the political and economic context of my town, the local challenges and opportunities, and the stories of all the people who ever lived in my house. During this time of getting to know her, I taught my first leadership theories course, which included a survey of historical and contemporary theories. I found myself using her as an example often, as we spent a lot of time together and she brought me new insights on older theories.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the gap between the context of historical leadership theory and today's students and teachers highlighting the challenge for leadership educators in teaching theory. To do this, I begin by giving examples of two leadership theories that Eleanor

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helped contextualize for me. Then, I describe how my relationship with Eleanor helped me to see the gap in context between these theories and my lived experience and discuss that the gap between theory, leadership educator and student is accelerating. I conclude with thoughts on how leadership educators, practitioners and scholars may approach this widening gap in the future.

Living leadership theory

In this section, I provide a broad description of two leadership theories and illustrate two components of those theories in connection with Eleanor's life. Those include (1) courageous followership, illustrating (a) the courage to challenge and (b) the courage to assume responsibility, and (2) authentic leadership, illustrating (a) balanced processing and (b) relational transparency.

Courageous followership

Eleanor is a petite but substantial woman. She has narrow feet and perfectly hemmed pants and eats a jar of pickles every week. She seems to have everything figured out and everything is "just so." All this makes sense as to why she was a very successful ward secretary for the hospital. A majority of her stories come from her time at work, where it is clear to me that without formal authority over the doctors or nurses – she was in charge! She lived [Chaleff's \(2009\)](#) model of courageous followership, which his extended version includes seven dimensions of followership: The courage to (1) assume responsibility, (2) serve, (3) challenge, (4) participate in transformation, (5) take moral action, (6) speak to the hierarchy and (7) listen to followers. This model emphasizes that followership is not a rank, but a role and recognizes the follower's role in checking the balance, power and morality of the leader.

Eleanor exhibited *the courage to challenge*. It's no surprise that in her stories of her time at the hospital, the doctors were male and she and the nurses were female. Although there are some funny stories about doctors she loved, she also told stories of those who were mean, rude, and demeaning to the nurses. Eleanor never shied away from those doctors. She was very knowledgeable about how the floor was run, how the orders were written and who the patients were in every room. When she saw mistakes made by these powerful doctors, she always spoke up to challenge them if she knew they were wrong. If she did not, patients might be harmed. Those stories of hers end with them respecting her because of her directness and integrity. The courage to challenge connects a specific element to the bigger tension noted by the model, that leaders with power are not always ethical. It takes challenges to unethical behavior, toxic leadership or inequity to hold organizations and individuals accountable.

She also had *the courage to assume responsibility* when the hospital faced challenges. One time there was a terrible car crash on interstate 70 that runs through Hays, and there were numerous burn victims brought to the small hospital. They simply needed more hands to help treat the patients as quickly as possible, and many people could not stomach the smell. Eleanor had no issue working for hours in the room doing anything she was asked to do even though it was far from her duties and received no extra compensation. Similarly, but on a happier note, she spent time volunteering on the diaper changing assembly line on the maternity floor one month when so many babies were born all at once! It is clear she never allowed her formal role to limit her influence on the organization and its people. Instead of assuming a role of follower and being told what to do, she courageously assumed shared responsibility. I believe that is why her time at the hospital has been so memorable for her.

Authentic leadership

When Eleanor went to the pharmacy one day, they asked her for her birthday. Ending her answer in 28, the pharmacy tech said, "28, what do you mean 28?" She answered, "Well, before the 2000s there were the 1900s." Eleanor, and amazingly her twin brother, represent a

generation of people we sometimes forget are still with us. Yet, there is so much we can still learn from them. Authentic leadership (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004) is a theory my students latch onto quickly but sometimes gloss over the deeper components of the theory. Authentic leaders are driven by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and an internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) – in sum, they know who they are, live in alignment with their values and don't allow others to shake their morals. Eleanor exhibits these components, which I attribute to her longevity in this world.

Eleanor raised her kids when they played in the creek and came home when the streetlights came on. When she recently filled out a form for church that asked why she chose that Catholic Church (one out of the four in Hays), she said she had been going to it for 76 years, and it is the only one that existed when she arrived. She's volunteered to maintain the flowers at the church for 28 seasons. She's been a widow and lived alone for 30 years. This longevity brings a great ability for *balanced processing*. She has seen it all. She's seen the pendulum swing in both directions. She's lived the ups and downs. She's not reactive to the minutia because she has perspective. She's not been pulled into the polarized culture created by social media. She comes to her thoughts authentically grounded in her moral reasoning and shaped by critical life events. She is unwavering, which is very refreshing in a world where people seem easily influenced and manipulated.

Additionally, Eleanor has never had the internet in her home. She's never owned a computer. She tells stories of when fax machines were new, but when computers started coming into the hospital she chose to retire. Eleanor has one small box-style television in her home, which she only watches on occasion. She has a flip phone that fits in her pocket with no apps. She plays solitaire with physical cards in her living room every night before she goes to bed. Her lack of digital engagement makes her incredibly present and *relationally transparent*. She knows what is going on in the world by being in the world. She "touches grass" by literally touching grass, plants and flowers. She knows her neighbors because she looks up when they walk by and says hello to them. She calls me on the phone to ask how I'm doing. When I enter her home, it's like entering the past. It's calming, grounding, centering – it is authentic.

Navigating the gaps in theoretical context

The role of the leadership educator will only get more complex over time. As leadership theory evolves, there will be more theories to cover and harder decisions about what historical theories ought to be covered in a survey course. The divergent perspectives in leadership theory will require more nuance to present and unpack. The amount of literature associated with theory, including research about and applications of theory, is ever growing. Additionally, the lived experiences of the students and teachers will get further the context in which the historical theories were developed.

Teaching a leadership theories course while getting to know Eleanor drew my attention to the gap between when theories were created and my lived experience. My theoretical orientation to leadership has been through collective lens (Ospina & Foldy, 2016) where leadership is viewed as a shared responsibility among stakeholders. Therefore, although I've learned about followership models, I've always felt the leader and follower relationship was a false dichotomy. Yet, I was tasked with teaching Chaleff's model as part of our introduction to leadership concepts course, and I understood the basics of the seven dimensions. Yet, I did not truly get the "courageous" piece.

When Eleanor tells her stories about some of the doctors who were dismissive or rude to the women working in the hospital and then her challenge of them, she often says "They couldn't hit you," emphasizing that the professionalism of the workplace provided protections from physical violence that are not always present in domestic environments. Additionally, her courage to take responsibility to volunteer in a surgical room to help burn patients had to have required courage to enter that space as a woman without formal medical training. Eleanor

helped me see why courage was relevant to followership that now makes me better and teaching followership and why it was groundbreaking at the time it was theorized. The need for courage sank in deeper when I heard Ira Chaleff speak on a podcast describing that the backstory of the courageous follower was growing up “in a household where [his] material grandmother lost her entire family in the Holocaust” leading him to wonder, “Why did people follow such a destructive leader?” (Allen, 2022, para. 6). My ability to teach Chaleff’s model was strengthened by understanding its historical context.

Similarly, Eleanor’s stories bring historical perspective to the balanced processing and relational transparency aspects of authentic leadership. I understand what they mean in definition, but I am a digital native. My processing and relationships have been mediated through platforms like Facebook and technologies like the smartphone. Spending time with her and understanding how she interacts with the analog world for everything helped me to see a purer form of authentic leadership. Luthans and Avolio (2003) name four positive psychological attributes associated with authentic leadership: confidence, hope, optimism and resilience. From my perspective as a leadership educator, these four attributes are diminishing in my students with the increase of technology and social media.

Furthermore, I am seeing a widening gap between me and my students in many of our lived experiences. Haidt (2024) explains there is a deep divide between those who had a play-based childhood like me and those with a phone-based childhood like most of my students. Those who had a play-based childhood spent more time in the physical world having face-to-face interactions with a small number of people that included risky play, which developed sustained attention, discovery and independence. In contrast, a phone-based childhood includes the most time in the virtual world with asynchronous interactions between many people, which develops anxiety, fragility and fragmented attention. For students who grew up in a phone-based childhood and are attending college during the development of AI, I wonder if balanced processing or relational transparency is attainable. Will they ever truly be authentic leaders if they are afraid to share their thoughts in fear of judgment and backlash like they experience online?

Conclusion

The gap between historical theories and the lived experiences of leadership educators and leadership students will continue to widen due to literal time and societal changes. Therefore, leadership educators will need to be more intentional about selecting what historical theories remain relevant to leadership courses and programs. For example, will teaching trait theories always be relevant for students to understand how the Western canon of leadership theory originated? How many specific behavioral theories are important for a student to understand?

Once selected to be part of coursework, how can leadership educators themselves first get acquainted with these theories and their true origins? Not all leadership educators have degrees in leadership and may not have learned these theories through their coursework. Additionally, colleges and universities continue to trend toward more adjunct instructors. It may not be feasible for most instructors to read original sources of theories, but an emphasis on the contextual drivers of those theories ought to be conveyed.

As leadership educators teach theories to students, they may need to develop creative ways to contextualize theories. This might include describing social and political forces at play during the time period, explaining key challenges in leadership contexts such as industry or illustrating key perspectives of leadership at the time. This might include having students visit with someone like Eleanor, engaging with oral histories or watching films from the time to help set the stage.

Lastly, as a relatively young field, we still could preserve our history more than older fields. Leadership scholars may focus on preserving leadership theory history such as capturing oral histories of theorists or practitioners. Hearing Ira Chaleff talk about the origins of his theory brought to life for me in a way that I didn’t previously understand. Hearing Eleanor describe

enacting that theory demonstrated the theory in practice. These kinds of stories are valuable and vanishing.

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