Leading Librarians: The Library and Paths of Inquiry into Leadership*

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ABSTRACT
Librarians lead, in part, by guiding scholars and students to sources of knowledge about leadership. This article explores conceptions of leadership from the perspectives of practitioners and scholars as different sources of knowledge. It illuminates the contributions that different disciplines make to understanding leadership as a multidisciplinary endeavor by elucidating questions from the perspective of relevant disciplines. The author urges librarians to apply these questions to their roles and to become leading librarians.

INTRODUCTION
Questions about leadership for librarians occur in two ways. First, the library is an organization and/or polity unlike any other with people playing the role of leader and also playing the role of follower. Therefore, librarians need to think about leadership in their organizational setting. Second, librarians play a key role in leading others to the sources of knowledge for understanding leadership.

In regard to the first context for questions, there is little to be said. Since this author is not a librarian and has not studied leadership in libraries, he cannot contribute any specific insights into the unique organizational context of a library. It can only be suggested that, since organizational context is so important, it is essential that the

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more general questions that arise about leadership be carefully situated in the organizational culture of librarians.

It is the role of the librarian as a leader of those seeking greater understanding of leadership that this article will address. In 1987, while establishing and directing the Luce Leadership Project of the Association of American Colleges, this author published an article that examined the alternative frameworks that different disciplines brought to understanding leadership and developed an extensive list of questions from different disciplinary perspectives. In this revision of the earlier article, the intention is to repeat those questions. Before doing so, the leadership role of the librarian as a guide to the scholar, the student, and the leader as he or she seeks answers to these questions will be emphasized.

The librarian is uniquely qualified to help the student or scholar efficiently seek the guidance of earlier thinkers as he or she addresses questions about leadership. How the librarian should go about using his/her technical skills to contribute to the inquiry is a complex question that poses every single issue of strategy and tactic in pursuing leadership.

For example, the research librarian who is familiar with the philosophical sources of analysis of leadership will have to work out a leadership strategy to inspire the very positivistic psychologist to use the literatures from the humanities or arts, which is where the hard-nosed, mathematically inclined psychologist will place philosophy. Since the psychologist will think that he or she knows more than the librarian about the literature of leadership (and often might), the librarian will be placed in the position of leading in a manner that we sometimes call "from the back of the room" or through an approach that assumes no external source of power beyond the knowledge that he or she has to offer. In order for the librarian to use her/his special familiarity with the topology of knowledge in a way that serves those seeking understanding of leadership, he or she must understand some important matters concerning leadership.

To understand fully this author's perspective, it is necessary to know that he is skeptical about supposedly interdisciplinary inquiries. True interdisciplinarity is rare. Indeed, with the exception of some sciences such as biochemistry and biophysics, which evolved from interdisciplinary research into disciplines themselves, this author has yet to see an interdisciplinary inquiry. But there are many fields that require knowledge from many disciplines to be understood—education, cognitive science, and intercultural studies, for example. Leadership, like these multidisciplinary fields, requires fancy footwork in modes of inquiry and standards of evidence and
argument. To admit this limitation at the start is to encourage prudence and caution, not to dismiss or belittle the value of the enterprise.

The first task in a class, a course, or a program, is to develop a tentative definition of leadership and criteria about what constitutes a leader. The various literatures are full of definitions that focus upon the ability to change group behavior, the exercise of power, the valuation of authority, and the existence of followers. There is little consideration of how we use the concept in different institutional and organizational settings. And there is almost no debate about the various definitions used. In fact, this discussion assumes that we will know leadership when we see it, and that leaders are simply known.

In order to impart some rigor to considering the concept, the author would pose these variations on the question, "What is leadership?": Do leaders require followers? Does the concept of leaders have different meanings in different institutional, national, or historical settings? Does the role of leader assess its own authority? Does this authority require consent? How do power and authority relate in the concept of leadership? How do leaders actually lead? How do we assume how well they lead?

A number of traditional questions were not listed—is leadership a trait, for example—because this sort of question is less than interesting and probably unanswerable. While the particular question about environment versus character is now passé, the significance of understanding the environmental features that interact with personality and character in the recruitment and success of leaders should never be underestimated.

Conceptual questions seldom arise from leaders who are leading, but answers to these questions will influence how we answer more practical questions, which are the stuff of the exercise of leadership and interest those engaged in self-conscious leadership development.

**Questions Arising from Practice**

**How are Leaders Recruited and Selected?**

When we look at governance systems, issues of election and selection play a significant role. These issues raise questions that can only be answered through use of an ethical framework and the careful collection of empirical data. Where do leaders come from demographically? What is the connection between recruitment and selection (or election)? Are leaders selected or self-selected? What is the impact of institutions that are self-consciously committed to a culture of leadership (for example, the military academies and Ivy League schools) on the recruitment and selection of leaders throughout society?
How Do Leaders Lead?

These sorts of questions inform the approach of a number of scholars of leadership, particularly in the applied sciences. How does one learn to be a leader? Once one is anointed, what skills are necessary and what is the nature of the activity of leadership?

Students in leadership courses are reading some of the thousands of biographies of leaders. While each biography describes how heroes go about the leadership business, there is a paucity of comparisons of different leaders with attention to similarities and differences of techniques of leadership. Students should be considering: Do leaders use incentives or sanctions or both? Do leaders at different times use different techniques? Does institutional setting affect leadership style and techniques? Are there techniques of leadership, such as time management, which account for its constructive exercise? How do leaders communicate? Are there important gender or ethnic differences in leadership style? What are they? Is the exercise of leadership an incremental (transactional) or discontinuous (transformational) process or both? How do standards of leadership vary according to context?

What is the Relationship Between Leader and Followers?

To understand leaders is to understand followers. Whether one is a leader or a follower depends upon the situation and the institutional context. Lincoln was a political leader but a religious follower; he set ethical standards in the political system but was not a theological pacesetter. The leader/follower nexus can pose a series of interesting questions that can best be pursued by careful analysis of crises and decision making. What is the connection among individual characteristics, organizational features, and historical moment that casts the same individual in different roles in different settings at different moments? How does the communication system between leaders and followers work? What are the rights and duties of leaders in relation to followers and vice versa?

How Do We Evaluate Leadership Quality?

Much of the literature, while seeming to focus on the nature of leadership, in fact evaluates particular qualities of specific leaders. We need to develop detailed strategies for evaluating leadership according to standards that are set in the context of a particular organization and a society at a specific historical moment. Even with these qualifications, students of leadership can generate criteria and standards. This requires both analytical and political acumen. Understanding the quality of leadership requires an analytical framework; evaluating for purposes of improving or changing
leadership requires political agreement in regard to all of these questions. What is the culture of the particular organization and/or society? How does the leader understand and respond to that culture? What substantive changes occurred while a particular leader stood watch? What values are appropriate to evaluate a particular leadership record? How might one evaluate a particular group of leaders who operate in similar settings and whose activity affects each other? What are the systems for holding leaders accountable? How might they vary?

What Resignation Tells about Leadership?

One of the most important occasions for the exercise of leadership is when a leader resigns on issues of principle. Although this phenomenon has become rarer—particularly in American society—when it does occur it provides a unique opportunity for students to understand better the obligations and the constraints of leadership. The evidence one must examine to answer the queries puts in dramatic relief the impact of both character and environment on leadership. When is the resignation actually initiated by the person resigning and when is it a cover for evolution or revolution in the system? By what criteria does one justify a resignation? What is the standard for such action? How do politics and principle interact in events of resignation? When do resignations actually change politics and/or transform systems? When a political candidate espouses an unpopular belief and then loses an election, is this a form of resignation?

Questions from the Disciplines

Another way to enter the discussion of leadership is to adapt the perspectives of particular disciplines. Since much of our understanding of leadership is informed by the work of scholars engaged in a variety of disciplines, sensitivity to the kinds of questions they ask will help students understand what they can learn from particular disciplines. As we approach leadership from various disciplinary perspectives, however, we must be especially sensitive to the difference of level of analysis: Does the discipline look mainly at the individual? Does it mainly examine the connection among individuals in groups? Does it explore primarily the behavior of groups? Is it preoccupied with the structure of the whole society?

Social Psychologists

The social psychologists are the modern scholars who have the longest tradition of serious concern about leadership. Their scholarship is often criticized by scholars from other fields because
of apparently trivial conclusions. But the questions they pose and the issues they raise are important to understanding both the individual as leader and the connection between the individual and the organizational culture. What strategies in various contexts do leaders use to get followers to follow? Which is more important in the exercise of leadership, persuasion or coercion? What is the connection between experiments using subjects and control groups, simulations, and the exercise of leadership in the real world? Are tests and inventories useful? Does the methodology and epistemology of social science change the patterns under study and create "noise" in interpretation? For example, if one asks subjects to report on their thoughts and motivations, do the subjects themselves change their leadership behavior?

A major problem in the social psychological literature is the lack of longitudinal data. Most studies are of contemporary experiments or of an organization as it operates at the moment. There are few connections made between the rich human development literature and the study of the social psychology of leadership.

**The Psychohistorical Approach**

Psychohistorical approaches to understanding leaders have looked to formative, early childhood experiences and a range of individual relationships to explain individual behavior in social settings. This tradition, of recent vintage, has focused on the individual and asks questions that reflect the shortcomings of psychoanalysis as a clinical discipline but are still important to understanding individual leaders. The greatest problem posed by the questions asked by psychohistorians is finding evidence to answer them. Does psychoanalytic theory help us understand the behavior of individual leaders? Are there alternative theories of individual behavior which better explain the nexus between the individual and the social? Which personal experiences contribute to our understanding of how individuals play their leadership and followership roles?

**Management Studies**

Much writing about leadership is emerging from management studies. This multidiscipline uses applied social sciences to explicate the behavior of persons in decision-making roles. Its strength has been its focus upon cases and the collection of data to describe reality. What is the difference, if any, between leadership and management? Can the criterion of efficiency measure a leader? What is the strategic role of a leader? What are the limitations of corporate settings for understanding leadership? Is leadership entrepreneurship?
One criticism often leveled at both psychoanalysis and social psychology is that, after many years of concern about the study of leadership, neither discipline has shed much light on interesting questions. This criticism seems to be fair, but a possible corollary is not warranted: some critics then dismiss both disciplines. Each is quite necessary in connecting the individual with the social system in order to have a complete understanding of leadership.

**Politics**

The study of politics is the study of a special form of leadership. Whether in democracies or in dictatorships, the study of the distribution of power—the essence of political science—is the study of leader/follower interaction in the larger society. The potential questions are many and the methods eclectic. Answers to questions raised by political science can come from case studies, both historical and contemporary. The case method is not only descriptive; it can also be used to test theory. How does a society identify leaders? What is the relationship between the nature of the political system and those who lead it? What is the relationship between principle and opportunity in the accession to and the termination of leadership? How do we compare the exercise of leadership in the public sector with its exercise in the private sector? Is it possible to compare leadership across political cultures, transnationally, and between democracies and dictatorships? If so, how?

**Sociologists**

Sociologists lean toward explaining group behavior in relation to general theories of society rather than accounting for the nature of leadership of groups. The exceptions are the small group sociologists and those who look at the emergence and behavior of leaders in relation to followers in diverse social settings. The questions posed by sociologists are central to understanding the connection between selection and behavior on the one hand and larger social forces on the other. Who has access to positions of leadership? What is the relationship between larger socioeconomic forces and the distribution of opportunity for leadership? How does the culture within a social unit affect, and how is it affected by, the larger social structure? How do both affect styles and strategies of leadership? The evidence for answering these questions can come from both case studies and the analysis of large volumes of demographic and other statistical data. Although applied science may have its limits in its statistical methods in helping us understand leadership, it can be quite informative in elucidating the patterns of access and connection between and to leadership.
Historians

Historians have been writing about leaders ever since Clio first commissioned the craft. But these same historians have only rarely speculated about the nature of leadership. Indeed, the uses of history in studying leadership are as unexplored as is the nature of leadership through history. What can we learn from biographies of leaders? What causes or correlates with the emergence of particular leaders at specific historical moments? What are the limits of historical record for understanding future leadership strategies?

To disregard historical evidence in our search to understand leadership would be to dismiss the richest vein we could mine. The challenge is to test some theoretical explanations about the nature of leadership across historical periods and examples in a manner that explores the richness of the real world including women and minorities, the rich and the poor, the Occident and the Orient, and in a manner that acknowledges that leadership does not emerge and occur only in political settings.

Philosophy

Philosophy is the oldest discipline with an interest in leadership, yet in contemporary philosophy, leadership is only considered insofar as theories of political obligation play a role in contemporary political philosophy and jurisprudence. The recent renaissance of political philosophy provides a framework for discussing access to leadership and the ethics of leadership. The questions are ancient, although in their contemporary form they are rarely asked. Philosophy can offer two services to understanding leadership: The first is to clear away the underbrush, to use Locke's phrase, in order to have some conceptual clarity in our discussion; the second is to connect the actions of leaders to general moral principles so that we can assess the ethical quality of leadership. Why should followers obey leaders? Who sets the standards by which leaders should be judged? What sorts of actions constitute leadership? What is the relationship between power and authority? Does leadership require the consent of the followers?

It is essential that we also ask anthropologists and economists, literary critics and communications theorists, scholars of education and law, and many others to contribute explicitly to our understanding of leadership. Understanding leadership is a multidisciplinary task. We need all the help we can get. The problem of relating disciplines to advance our understanding of complex human realities is ubiquitous but rarely rigorously discussed. My sense is that methods of analysis grounded in particular realities will be most useful in understanding leadership, but the variety of case studies and
consideration of historical figures needs to be structured by careful
generalizations that are tested by example and counterexample.

**CONNECTING PARADIGMS FOR UNDERSTANDING**

We will not find a new paradigm of inquiry to inform our understanding of leadership; instead, we must learn to connect paradigms drawn from the disciplines. We can understand if we are more sensitive to the issues even if we do not create a new mode of inquiry and evaluation out of whole cloth. Women's studies has certainly made a contribution as a field, but, in spite of the claims of a few of its advocates, its contribution has been one of greater sensitivity to half the world, not a new mode of inquiry based on a paradigm of the type that informs either physics or history. The challenge is to be well read enough to draw on disciplines that are not our own and to be modest enough to understand the limitations of such poaching. We need more teams of poachers working together.

Those who come from practice and from the observations of practice pose one type of question. Those who come from a specific discipline pose yet others. There are also relevant differences in the framing of questions between those who view their task as teaching and those who view their vocation as research—for those engaged in both, the questions differ according to the hat worn. Even those mainly engaged in teaching differ according to the teaching task they view for themselves. For example, the person engaged in teaching people how to be leaders tends to emphasize understanding of problem identification, approaches to solutions, and techniques of implementation; those active in the enterprise of liberal education focus on the understanding of leadership as a general social phenomenon and learning about leadership as a way to develop the analytical skills that are central to a good education.

In framing the questions herein, I have viewed myself as trying to understand leadership, not explicitly trying to develop leaders. Those who wish to develop leaders must understand much more than the current state of knowledge about leadership if they are to do more than engage in the documentation of trivia. Leadership development is an important personal and social goal. But it is a goal dependent upon better understanding the nature of leadership. Both in teaching and in research we can advance that understanding only if we can frame questions whose answers can be tested by independent critique.

This brief essay has been an attempt to frame the questions. The unique role of the librarian is helping the student, the scholar, and other librarians to frame the answers. Librarians lead by providing leads. The research librarian in particular can efficiently delimit
sources for answers to particular questions. Drawing paths through the valleys and the mountains of knowledge about leadership to the best source for answers is the leadership gift of librarians.

Leading librarians will guide the rest of us as we pursue paths of inquiry toward understanding leadership. Librarians who question critically and reflect upon their own leadership are those most likely to contribute to our understanding and create more effective knowledge resources that can improve leadership in libraries and through libraries for the larger society. Those who have thought reflectively about leadership will be able to understand their experiences of leadership and followership and use that insight to serve their constituents. That reflection will help choose the best sources among the plethora of writings about leadership. This service through contemplative leadership is indeed the essence of leadership and a profound contribution to be made by leading librarians.