

**Let's go the extra mile:**  
**Social identity and the link between leadership and followership**

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## Let's go the extra mile:

### Social identity and the link between leadership and followership

In John Adair's famous "short course on leadership" he observed that the single most important word in the leader's vocabulary is 'we' and that the least important word is 'I'. In light of this statement, it is ironic that research into the psychology of leadership has focused almost exclusively on the personal qualities of leaders (their 'I'-ness, if you like) and largely neglected the psychological dimensions of their relationship with the group they lead (their 'we-ness').

Testament to this state of affairs, it is clear that massive resources have been invested in the development of management tools that are designed to assess a person's personality and their inherent 'fitness' to lead. Indeed, most readers will be familiar with at least two or three such instruments and are likely to have expended some effort (and considerable money) discovering the secrets of their own and others' leadership profile, leadership style or leadership potential.

Set against this trend, relatively few resources have been devoted to exploring the possibility that the key to leadership lies beyond the person *as an individual* and instead resides in their properties as a functioning *group member*. Recently, however, researchers have started to mount a concerted challenge to this established leadership credo. At the forefront of such work is research that has been informed by a *social identity approach* to organizational psychology<sup>1,2</sup>

The social identity approach takes as its starting point an assertion that a person's sense of self — who they think they are — can be defined along a continuum. At one extreme, their sense of themselves is as a unique individual (their *personal identity*; e.g., John Smith with all his idiosyncratic tastes, values and aspirations) at the other, their sense of self is as a group member (their *social identity*; e.g., as English, or an employee of Company X).

The social identity approach argues that whether a person's behaviour will be determined by personal or by social identity depends on features of social context.

Amongst other things, we tend to define ourselves and act as individuals under circumstances where we compare ourselves and compete with other members of the ingroups to which we belong. If John is in competition with another employee of Company X for a promotion, he will tend to think about what makes him different from that person and accentuate his individuality in the process of advancing his personal self-interests. However, when we compare an ingroup with outgroups that we do not belong to, we are much more likely to act as group members. At a rugby match between England and Australia, or when competing with Company Y for a contract, John is much more likely to define himself in terms of a group membership that is shared with other members of his ingroup. Moreover, in these contexts he will tend to accentuate the similarities within that group (and its difference from the outgroup), and seek to align himself with other ingroup members in a bid to advance the interests of the group as a whole — his *collective* self-interest.

These ideas have enormous practical implications for understanding the way organizations (and the people in them) work. For example, if a person is acting in terms of personal identity, then they are much more likely to work in a way that benefits only themselves than would be the case if they are acting in terms of social identity. Social identification is thus uniquely implicated in a range of positive organizational processes: in particular, so-called *organizational citizenship behaviours* (OCBs) which advance the group as a whole but may actually disadvantage the person as an individual. These OCBs include displays of loyalty, rule-following and extra-role behaviour. They are exhibited by the person who declines a better-paid job elsewhere, who turns up for an Open Day at the weekend, or who helps new employees settle in. Without such behaviour most organizations would collapse. By the same token, social identity is also uniquely implicated in a range of negative organizational behaviours including bullying and social exclusion. For example, members of a powerful group that has a strong sense of shared social identity may feel it is justified to put pressure on people who do not live up to ingroup norms, and be inclined to treat outsiders unfairly<sup>3</sup>.

Theoretically, the important point here is that in all these situations the individual's behaviour is a reflection of their real self. Contrary to popular wisdom, there is no sense in which John's personal identity is any more 'true' or important than his social identity. It is also the case that in situations where John's behaviour is determined by his group membership (e.g., at a rugby match, or during a contract bid), his behaviour needs to be explained in terms of social identity principles rather than his personal identity. And it is because personality measures focus only on the personal dimensions of self that their utility as predictors of behaviour in such contexts proves to be extremely limited.

Applying these arguments to the study of leadership, we can start to see why a focus on any leader's individuality also proves unrewarding. In the first instance, it is worth noting that most definitions of leadership see it as the process by which a person influences *other* group members to achieve group goals. For this reason, leadership is actually a process that demands social identification on the part of *all* group members in order to be realized<sup>4</sup>. A leader who is only interested in advancing his or her personal interests will not display leadership, just as a follower who does not share a sense of common purpose with the leader will not display followership. In effect, then, leadership centres around a *shared* identity that energizes and empowers all group members. Moreover, it is theoretically useful to think of leaders as *entrepreneurs of identity*<sup>5</sup> who help create, co-ordinate and control this sense of 'who and what we are'. Indeed, shared identity is the source of both a leader's charisma and followers' enchantment and it motivates all parties to go the extra mile in pursuit of group goals.

These are bold claims. Nonetheless, they are supported by a growing body of empirical research that also casts doubt on conventional beliefs about the leadership process<sup>6</sup>. Research suggests, for example, that under some circumstances the very process of systematically selecting leaders can undermine group productivity. This is because it encourages internal competition that focuses candidates on their personal identity-based differences, rather than on their group-based similarities. Indeed, under conditions where a group *already has* a strong sense of shared identity, appointing a formal leader is often unnecessary. Our experimental studies go further in suggesting

that in such circumstances formal appointment of leaders can actually undermine group productivity at the same time that random leader selection proves highly effective.

The implications of this analysis become even more provocative when we reflect upon arguments that are typically invoked to justify the very high salaries awarded to chief executives — an issue that is seldom far away from the news headlines. We have argued that because this strategy draws employees' attention to personal differences within the organization and undermines a collective sense of social identity, it may adversely impact on employee motivation and group performance. As Peter Drucker<sup>7</sup> has observed

Very high salaries at the top — disrupt the team. They make even high-ranking people in the company see their own top management as adversaries rather than as colleagues.... And that quenches any willingness to say "we" and to exert oneself except in one's own immediate self-interest.

Along these lines, Hollander<sup>8</sup> has noted that there is *negative* correlation between company performance and the pay differential between bosses and workers. This point is confirmed by some of our experimental studies that have manipulated the rewards given to leaders for performing a group-related task, while holding constant the remuneration given to followers. In these studies, giving leaders greater financial reward had no impact whatsoever on their willingness to exert energy on behalf of the group. Its only consequence was to erode the enthusiasm of followers — which it did very effectively. And, again, because organizations are totally dependent on followers to enact any leader's vision, this is a problem.

In concluding, it is interesting to reflect on the question of why management theorists persevere with approaches that celebrate the cult of the individual and continue to overlook the contribution of the group. As Pfeffer<sup>9</sup> has observed, one simple reason is that organizational psychology is profoundly individualistic. This is reflected in the tools it has developed, the industry it has created, and the theories it clings to. It is worth adding too, that this individualism also corresponds with lay theories of leadership that abound in popular culture. As children we are taught by Ladybird books that history is a process through which great personalities (Alexander-the-Great, Napoleon,

Churchill) impose themselves on the world and drag it kicking and screaming towards progress. Later, airport bookstalls feed us an equally romantic diet in which self-avowedly 'great' business leaders identify the 7 great habits, the 10 insider secrets or the 14 winning ways which serve to differentiate them from ordinary mortals like you and me. These books make great reading (and a lot of money for their authors), but they should stay on the fiction and fantasy shelves where they belong.

A major challenge for organizational psychology, then, is to develop theories that do not just passively regurgitate romantic prejudices that pass for 'common sense'. Indeed, when this interrogative perspective is adopted, we would argue that established beliefs bear little correspondence to processes of true leadership as it is practiced and experienced. Moreover, because they serve largely to accentuate the division between would-be leaders and their would-be followers, they can actually undermine the very thing they would create: a productive, healthy and invigorated organization.

For leadership is never a question of going it alone and it is not about being a great individual. If leaders want their followers to go the extra mile, they need to ensure that everyone is in the same vehicle and that the demands and dividends of the journey are shared.

*Notes:*

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3. For a recent discussion of the impact of these processes on men's treatment of women in organizations, see Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2004). The Glass Cliff: Evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management*
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