

Ecological Leadership

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Abstract

Ecological leadership incorporates a systems perspective as a basis for conceptualizing and assessing the integration of leadership performance with organizational priorities. Traditional leadership models referred to as charismatic, positional, and industrial all share an emphasis on top-down or hierarchical power—a characteristic value in times of crisis or for efficiently achieving well-established goals, services, and products. The ecological leader has an advantage when the stability and success of an organization require a focus on effective processes that must be deployed flexibly to maximize effective implementation of the vision. The maximization of all available resources on any given problem or opportunity is one of the primary advantages of the ecological leadership process. This process also embraces the inclusion of any and all people who have specific knowledge, skill, or experience to advance projects or initiatives. For each of the various dimensions of leadership there are tipping points that contribute to decisions by leaders, in full collaboration with stakeholders, to move from the traditional/positional leadership structure and role to an ecological leadership process and role.

Leadership Models and Factors

Followers amass when a leader represents a new vision for governance or goals; they disperse when leaders fail or are perceived to fail in delivering what was expected. Leadership, as a process, can be analyzed in many ways regardless of whether it is viewed in traditional or top-down models, referred to as “positional” and “industrial,” or collaborative, as indicated by newer models called “ecological” or “chaos theory” approaches. Leaders always work within a role structure that requires them to actuate change while maintaining a sense of continuity for meeting the needs of constituents or stakeholders. The ecological model of leadership is of particular interest to process educators because it is based on an open systems perspective with open-loop feedback and no assumption that the leader is important beyond his or her ability to serve the needs of the organization and its stakeholders.

Process educators are dedicated to systems change through the improved quality of processes for learning and growth and the improved quality of collaborative, i.e., ecological, leadership to support these outcomes. The features of leadership, as posited by ecological theory, make possible the creation of an expert profile (Table 1) that will fit varying leadership contexts, e.g., colleges and universities as well as businesses or non-profit organizations.

Reicher, Haslam, and Platow (2007) argue that the psychology of leadership is shifting away from the both the “charisma” theory introduced early in the 20th century and the “contingency model” favored by social psychologists in the 1960s and 1970s. The earlier model puts great emphasis on specific traits that make leaders able to persist through great challenges to save their followers. During World Wars I and II this seemed to characterize world leaders—but there was a dark side as well, as dramatically

illustrated by Hitler, Stalin, and other dictators who nearly destroyed civilization.

An ecological model may have limits in terms of helping us understand how national leaders operate but history shows that finding ways to share and sacrifice that are compatible with social identity, e.g., projects and policies during the Great Depression and WWII, will be engaged strongly as ways for the people of a country to come together while meeting a great challenge. When world crises, e.g., from WWI, create immediate and massive contingencies related to distributing food and re-establishing order, the “industrial” model of leadership has merit but may not produce longer-term stability as normality resumes. Historian Margaret MacMillan (2001) describes the idealism and the failures of the famous peace talks at Versailles following WWI. Many of the leaders were strong and committed, but the conditions were too complex for full success, both historically and in terms of emerging nationalism, including that of Bolshevism in Russia. Many serious problems continued to fester throughout the 20th century, even beyond WWII to conflicts of the 21st century in Asia and Africa.

A “contingency” model that emerged after WWII, as articulated by Fred Fiedler and his associates, put the emphasis on the match of the leader with the challenge “context.” Although this match assumption is logical, Reicher et al. report that the research results are “mixed,” and the charismatic and contingency models remain attractive to many. The ecological model incorporates both the contingency and charismatic models by using a systems approach to analyze how leadership emerges and changes in varying situations.

In the 1970s a new theme emerged from group psychology research. Tajfel (e.g., Dumont & Louw, 2009) and Turner

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(1991) theorize that social identity helps to explain the rise of leaders in many of the new nation states that emerged in both the 19th and 20th centuries. These leaders consciously dressed and talked in ways that resonated with their followers; they reciprocally reinforced “in-group” policies championed by other new leaders. Social psychology research has supported this theory in terms of showing that equality, justice, and other values must be demonstrated in the presentation and reality of leadership. Leaders who use their positions to gain excessive wealth or who fail to make sacrifices for their social identity groups will reduce followers’ sense that their leaders are authentic. Leaders cannot claim full responsibility for policies; they must engage followers in a dialogue that clarifies shared social identity so that their visions will be acclaimed. The social identity leadership style has a potential dark side in that “out-groups” tend to be excluded in certain ways because followers deem this to be appropriate.

In the current “electronic age,” businesses such as Google™ have changed the dynamics of how people communicate; these organizations are led by individuals with values and practices consistent with the nature of the new modes of communication that are the basis of their income and influence. Restrictive nations fear the empowerment associated with these new technologies and try to delimit who can login to Facebook®, Twitter®, and other new platforms that allow messages to go to many thousands or even millions of individuals at once. Leaders of these organizations succeed by using what is basically an ecological model. Researchers for “Project Oxygen” at Google™ (Bryant, 2011) manually coded qualitative data across many managers and then used careful interviews to validate eight “good behaviors” that appear to be fully compatible with an ecological model. The best managers coach, empower, expect results, and maintain focus on the vision in good times and bad. Low performing managers don’t put priority on communication, don’t assure that new employees are integrated into the culture, and fail to support the professional development of their staff.

Theory of Ecological Leadership

More recently, the hybrid, systems model of leadership, referred to as “ecological leadership” (e.g., Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005), has gained adherents because leaders not only must “fit” the challenge and have social identities consistent with their followers, but must actively seek out opportunities to share authority, responsibility, accountability, and resources within an organization. Wielkiewicz and Stelzner presented four features they assume to be central to ecological leadership: (a) tensions always exist due to how traditional leaders handle processes; (b) the context and leadership itself are more important than individual leaders; (c) organizations

thrive from many sources of input for decisions; and (d) leadership emerges from interactions between leaders and followers as they mutually engage problems related to a vision.

The basic premise of ecological leadership is that an effective leader will bring many individuals and groups to the forefront because these people have a special potential to help actualize the aspects of a vision. The leader remains as the keeper of the vision and overall direction of the organization by using collaborative strategies. Strong character traits of traditional models remain important because the ecological leader must deal with mistakes and competition, from within or without, by demonstrating both steadfastness and flexibility while sharing authority for how many important processes are implemented.

Ecological leadership, as a theory, has roots in critiques of the “industrial” (also called “positional”) model that has been the norm in Western companies and organizations. Wielkiewicz and Stelzner (2005) emphasize that the processes of leadership used for decisions and actions by industrial/positional leaders do not fully explain what constitutes effective leadership. They argue that, if the longer-term needs of an organization are to be well-served, leadership must be more important than the leaders themselves. Therefore a basic assumption of the ecological model is that leadership involves “floating” processes involving the leader and stakeholders/followers.

By contrast, in traditional industrial and positional leadership models, the emphasis is on the leader as an individual with specific—actually special—traits and abilities. An ecological leader is the keeper of the vision and maintains the overall direction of the organization, but not by possessing unusual traits. The ecological leader seeks to identify those in the organization who have traits and abilities that are strengths for achieving specific goals; the ecological leader negotiates with these individuals to be responsible and accountable, and provides them with necessary resources. Therefore an ecological leader willingly allows various individuals or teams to be independent in leading specific projects. Positional leaders, by contrast, tend to make decisions in a hierarchical manner to align organizational demands with available resources.

Although traditional conceptualizations of leadership remain valuable in certain ways, the interactive features of the ecological models move them closer to an integrated approach. Wielkiewicz and Stelzner (2007) responded to a special issue of the *American Psychologist* about the theory and research of leadership, arguing that most of the articles supported traditional industrial or positional theories. They concede that, in an article in the special issue, Hackman

and Wageman (2007) asked searching questions: Under what conditions does leadership matter? How do leaders' personal attributes interact with situational properties to shape outcomes? Are the phenomena of good and poor leadership qualitatively different? How can leadership models be reframed so that they treat all system members as both leaders and followers?

Wielkiewicz and Stelzner (2007) suggest that the answer to these questions is that the expertise to solve problems is distributed throughout an organization; this means that positional leaders often must decide and act without the benefit of all important perspectives, and this puts the organization at risk if decisions and strategies are wrong for the conditions that emerge. Leadership, in other words, is a work in progress that is shaped by the success of ecological, i.e., collaborative processes at all levels of an organization. They suggest that an integrative solution requires that all leadership models be used when they fit, but the ecological approach is essential for increasing learning from the experience of a constantly changing pattern of mutual collaboration between followers and leaders to achieve the mission and vision of an organization. It might be inferred that stakeholders will recognize the need for a leader's change to a positional model in a crisis because he or she will have built trust over the longer periods when conditions have been more normal.

Ecological Leadership Roles

The situations and problems that can confront a leader are myriad and include much that is unpredictable. A companion theory, chaos process theory, provides an understanding of how to deal with such unpredictability. Realizing that opportunities and risks must be assumed as constants that are only partially knowable, the ecological leader seeks to move the organization forward into new opportunities and prepares it for overcoming obstacles by maximizing the resources, skills, talents, and experiences of the entire organization. A key concept of chaos process theory is that there is functionality in everything that anybody does; the goal is to identify the potentially positive outcomes that each function has as its goal and to actualize these positive potentials. An ecological leader looks for ways that those undesired and indirect outcomes can be utilized in some form of productive action.

Lindborg (2007) recommends that the change processes in higher education require close attention to conscious, collective collaborations that will support both processes and outcomes. The change process must help all stakeholders stay on the path of change until all the phases of accomplishment and integration are achieved. Mecca (2007) argues that the change process must take into account the personal changes that participants need to make if the

change is to be integrated into the life of the organization. Change sponsors must move the responsibilities to many other stakeholders—consistent with ecological leadership principles—so that the change is promoted throughout the organization.

There are four common functions that are utilized by an ecological leader: counseling, mentoring, consulting, and coaching.

- Counseling, which is based on a medical model, involves the identification or diagnosis of problems that are impeding normal life and the finding of solutions to these problems.
- Mentoring, which is based on an experiential model, seeks to provide the benefit of previous learning to an individual or to groups of individuals.
- Consulting, which is based on the expert model, seeks to produce benefits for an outside organization by facilitating the application of specific knowledge or skills.
- Coaching, which is based on a performance model, seeks to help individuals and organizations identify and accomplish desired future accomplishments.

The ecological leader utilizes each of these four roles in strategies that will enable individuals as well as the organization to overcome obstacles and to maximize opportunities. Individuals, teams and organizations need to be able to use the processes associated with these four roles. Ecological leaders are able to identify the process that is needed at the time for the specific issue and are then able to connect the needed process between the “expert” provider and the recipient that is in need of the specific process.

Profile of an Ecological Leader

Based on the theory of ecological leadership, Table 1 is a presentation of the main processes that a skillful transformational leader should exhibit for each of the identified performance areas.

Tipping Points in Leadership

Ecological leaders whose practices match those described in the Profile of an Ecological Leader (Table 1) seek to maximize organizational effectiveness and to create opportunities for leveraging individual strengths, experiences, abilities, and resources. A key milestone of ecological leadership is the creation of a culture that includes creative communication for how and when individual resources can be used for mutual benefit. Hadley (2007) recommends careful attention to avoid language that can discourage participants from committing

Table 1 Profile of an Ecological Leader

Performance Area	Leader Behavior
Vision	<p>Clearly articulates the mission and vision</p> <p>Creates robust processes to support the vision</p> <p>Balances internal and external concerns and challenges</p> <p>Balances short- and long-term initiatives and risks</p> <p>Identifies “tipping points” for envisioned strategies</p>
Resource Management	<p>Inventories talent for multiple role and task potential</p> <p>Leverages talent to produce important outcomes efficiently</p> <p>Continually assesses boundary conflicts</p> <p>Values strengths and loyalty</p> <p>Motivates the positive growth of teams at all levels</p> <p>Initiates broadly applicable innovations and champions these improvements by serving as an effective change agent</p>
Administration	<p>Uses talent inventory knowledge to create effective work units</p> <p>Delegates work appropriately, and holds people accountable for their contributions to goals</p> <p>Prioritizes functions within the organization</p> <p>Motivates departmental and institutional development by creating opportunities for growth</p>
Balance of Responsibility & Authority	<p>Facilitates to achieve mutuality in all substantive decisions and assignments</p> <p>Assembles in-depth input from all levels of the organization</p> <p>Establishes clear standards of accountability at all levels</p> <p>Accepts failure for realistic reasons</p> <p>Clearly understands the expected outcomes and remains focused on them</p> <p>Addresses the specific needs of responsible units and individuals</p> <p>Identifies and promptly takes action to solve problems that impede the growth or progress towards the expected outcomes</p>
Consciousness of Organizational Culture	<p>Articulates organizational culture for all to assess</p> <p>Collaborates to set criteria for organizational culture</p> <p>Leads celebrations of successful endeavors</p>
Communication Facilitation	<p>Establishes patterns of communication related to participation in the vision</p> <p>Facilitates communication to identify how to integrate the system</p> <p>Keeps communication transparent across units and individuals</p>
Role Modeling	<p>Collaborates to set achievable and believable goals</p> <p>Models authenticity and integrity in times of stress</p> <p>Shares benefits from organizational accomplishments</p> <p>Displays charisma to build confidence internally and externally</p> <p>Grooms future leaders</p>
Mentoring	<p>Challenges mentees to define their own learning objectives, performance expectations, and action plans so that they can realize their personal and professional development outcomes</p> <p>Consistently models the behaviors and values of his or her own discipline</p> <p>Employs timely, effective interventions related to learning skills that stimulate growth in mentee performance</p>

Performance Area	Leader Behavior
Establishing a Learning Organization	Establishes reliable and valid measurement of processes and of quality of outcomes Uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to test hypotheses related to predictions about envisioned processes and outcomes Efficiently and effectively communicates findings from research activities in multiple modes to advance a community of understanding among all stakeholders Establishes a “learning organization” that continually leverages information and data Supports an integrated system by analyzing for outcomes that are essential to the success of the organization’s vision, culture, and talents
Professionalism in the Discipline	Is an expert practitioner in his or her discipline, as well as a scholar in the discipline of teaching/learning Has strong learning skills and continually strives to increase his or her knowledge and skills within his or her discipline Develops a network within and outside his or her discipline by building personal relationships with key individuals in the local, national, and international communities
Assessment	Is strongly growth oriented and practices assessment with a non-judgmental mindset Observes and analyzes performance in real-time and makes interpretations that are insightful to others Remains focused on the specific assessment criteria that are aligned with the purpose of the assessment Publicly shares self-and other assessments/evaluations of leadership strengths, areas of improvement, and insights for future change

to enhanced performance for themselves as part of how the organization will move forward. Utschig (2007) describes the factors that promote or hinder the promotion of an assessment culture within an organization. External factors such as accreditation and financial success must be taken into account; change agents must manage the internal factors to achieve the change process desired while maintaining standards in other quality areas. When ecological leadership is fully functioning it is like an entire team of MacGyvers on steroids. “Organic” communication benefits the organization, the individual, and, importantly, external as well as internal stakeholders.

The arguments for change from a positional to an ecological model of leadership are supported by theory and research, but the practice guidelines for transforming leadership of an organization from a traditional model to an ecological model remain unclear. Gladwell (2002) popularized the concept of “tipping points” to illustrate how social change evolves until a certain set of circumstances or state of acceptance occurs to move society as a whole to a new equilibrium. It is hypothesized here that leadership processes are likely to change only when important events, which can be positive as well as negative for an organization, force movement to a more effective model. As chaos theory explains, these events have an element of unpredictability, and there are also risks to making changes

in leadership style that cannot be understood before they are made. Ecological leadership theory has the distinct benefit of putting the benefits and risks into an orderly model that includes effective processes for continuous change of all roles in an organization.

Table 2 is based on criteria that are relevant to all types of leadership (e.g., Riggio, 2008). A key issue with transforming leadership of an organization is that change will not occur without motivating conditions. Leadership, as exhibited by any individual leader, will vary across the criteria on a continuum of behaviors and characteristics defined in the left column for traditional/positional to those in the right column for ecological/transformational. The types of “tipping point” events that are inferred to be likely as motivators for the shift from traditional to ecological are presented in the middle column.

Application Examples

An example of these principles being applied would be that of a community college engaging in the process of a transformational way of being. In response to external stressors and opportunities, which are combined with external opportunities and new internal ways of being, the organization as a whole moves forward in new ways and in new ways of performing its primary functions. The shift is initiated by leadership that “sees” current

Table 2: Continuum of Leadership

TRADITIONAL/ POSITIONAL	TIPPING POINTS	ECOLOGICAL/ TRANSFORMATIONAL
Vision <i>Definition: The long-term ability to plan and pursue a clear future organizational state</i>		
Board/Admin Orientation	Completion of an Existing Strategic Plan or Change in Top Leadership	Integrated System of Commitment to Mission
Challenge Example	This may occur when there is a significant negative shift in the primary market within which the organization functions.	
Opportunity Example	Upon the completion of a significant growth phase or at the end of a strategic plan implementation, the leadership vision is what can create the “next” significant phase.	
Shareholder Buy-In <i>Definition: The lasting commitment of contributing organizational members</i>		
Secondary to Administrative Control	Failed Business Plan or Fragmentation of Organizational Effort	Essential to Administrative Decision-Making Model
Challenge Example	Personal or individual agendas diverge resulting in organizational tension and lack of focused shareholder commitment.	
Opportunity Example	Organic alignment of the dedication of individuals is centered around mutually beneficial outcomes.	
Utilization of Authority <i>Definition: How the leader and the organization at large use power</i>		
Top-Down Management of All Processes	Significant Growth or Compelling External Challenge	Maximal Management to Ecologically Logical Units
Challenge Example	An unforeseen setback requires greater leverage of power than any single individual possesses.	
Opportunity Example	There is sharing or co-formulation of new power alignments to create new individual/organizational authority structures.	
Challenge Focus <i>Definition: Ongoing improvement and organizational development</i>		
Fulfill Current Expectations and Policies; Deal with Crises	Marginalization of Market Position or Key Functional Failure	Publicly Identify and Work on All Quality Goals
Challenge Example	Essential organizational functions either lose effectiveness or become irrelevant.	
Opportunity Example	New or different opportunities present that require a renovation of how the organization performs primary or essential functions.	
Communication Facilitation <i>Definition: Open organic free flow of candid and genuine information</i>		
Inform All Stakeholders about Decisions and Staff Structure	Loss of Focus and Efficiency that Results in Wasted Energy and Resources	Raise Awareness of Hidden Quality Issues and Use a Conflict Resolution Process
Challenge Example	Hidden or personal agendas become a block that conflicts with organizational operations.	
Opportunity Example	Individual character and integrity formulation leads to deeper and more transparent direct communication channels.	

Process Efficiency		
Definition: <i>Formal and informal structures that are both stable and flexible as needed</i>		
Hiring to Address New Needs or Processes	Inability to Hire Additional Needed People	Continual Re-Integration of Roles and Structures to Maximize Efficiency
Challenge Example	Historical organizational structures impede the maximization of newly discovered opportunities.	
Opportunity Example	The creation of new ways of doing business results in a new way of being for the entire organization.	

Responsibility		
Definition: <i>Ownership of decisions and duties balanced on all levels</i>		
Administrators Decide Who Is Responsible	Organizational Reaction to the Scapegoat Process	Mutual Decisions about Responsibilities
Challenge Example	There is a historical precedent of leadership defaulting responsibility by placing individual blame on various institutional members.	
Opportunity Example	The emerging culture built upon new organizational ventures creates a prediction of individual and team responsibility in possible failure and acknowledgement in potential success.	

Accountability		
Definition: <i>Members and leaders equally own consequences of decisions and actions</i>		
Administrators Decide Who Is Accountable	Ineffectiveness Reaches Critical Mass	Each Person or Unit Agrees to be Accountable in Mutually-Defined Areas
Challenge Example	The organization loses momentum leading to the necessity of overall organizational restricting.	
Opportunity Example	Leadership takes the position of placing them as being accountable to the stakeholders and forms new accountability contexts.	

Future Growth Focus		
Definition: <i>Current success viewed as foundational for new opportunities</i>		
Mandated or Incented by Leadership	Required Tasks Reach Magnitude that Exceeds Mandates or Incentives	Internal and Personal Motivation as a Way of Being
Challenge Example	The need for future movement is exceeded by external motivational resources.	
Opportunity Example	Leadership creates a new focus of opportunity either in the improvement of existing opportunities or in the identification of newly discovered potential ventures.	

directions and looks for new opportunities. Once the new direction has been established, the leadership empowers the shareholders to create new processes that build the collaborative functioning of all aspects of the community college organization. There are clear decision-making processes in place that allow for shared authority and accountability.

Another example could be an effective organization that is nearing the completion of its most recent strategic plan. The leadership can embark on a strategic planning process geared for the restructuring of a “siloesd” university. Various entities such as administration, staff, and faculty are able to “give up” their “ownership” of each specific area and rethink the alignment of the overall organization in order to create multi-entity buy-in for a new long-term strategy.

In both of the brief examples there are several points to remember. First, it is difficult to mandate ecological functioning; rather the influence of leadership is one of creating an environment that nurtures. Second, transformational leadership begins with leadership and then radiates outward to the entire organization.

Conclusion

The tradition of positional top-down leadership has several shortcomings. It is difficult to expect that any one individual would possess all the necessary skills, knowledge, and ability needed in our current global climate. It is also

unreasonable to require any one individual to be equipped to effectively lead an entire organization in areas that are outside of the scope of the individual leader’s expertise.

An increasingly complex world combined with an ever-rapidly changing marketplace taxes available resources to the breaking point. Gone are the days of large profit margins and significant margins for error. In a global economy with international competition, each and every resource must be leveraged in a successful organization. Complex organizations must not rely on any one single leader, but rather a leadership team of empowered individuals led by an equally empowered leader.

One of the primary leadership responsibilities is to create a collaborative environment that communicates, empowers, and adapts to each challenge and opportunity along the life cycle of the organization.

A change in the attitude of the leadership as well as the members of the organization is required to maximize individual effectiveness as well as to maximize organizational potency. When leaders and individual organizational members pool their resources, the result is efficiency and increased effectiveness. The willingness of the positional/traditional leader to engage in ecological leadership is the key starting point. The empowerment of the individual member is a key second aspect of ecological leadership. The actual culture of the organization is the third core trait of an effective organization that employs ecological leadership.

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