

LEADERSHIP, COMMUNICATION, AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

A Theory of Resonance,
Activation, and Cultivation

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A Theory of Resonance,
Activation, and Cultivation

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO LEADERSHIP, COMMUNICATION, AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

As the title indicates, this book explores the connections between *leadership* and *communication* – both of which are pervasive and emblematic of our times in their own right, and for a reason. Leadership and communication are both regarded as vitally important across contexts, including, but not limited to, politics, business, sports, health, education, religion, and the military. This book is designed for leadership and communication students, scholars, and practitioners who are interested in how these two fields relate to, intersect with, and build upon one another. Our focus is on the way leadership dynamics are described and understood, and the way those understandings are translated into practice across contexts and at multiple levels, from small, informal work groups to the complex interactions that occur on the national and international stages.

We hope the ideas presented and the practices discussed will help to shed light on what we see as some fundamental

challenges confronting those who think seriously about the nature of leadership and leadership practice. How, for example, can some leaders in the workplace, community, or national political scene succeed in amassing a large cadre of dedicated followers and be perceived by many as highly effective, and yet seemingly not possess or model the characteristics and competencies typically associated with successful leadership in most popular, professional, or academic writings on the topic? Why do certain social influence efforts connect with some audiences and not others, and how do we explain why some connections result quite immediately and others require a much longer period of time to develop – or never develop at all? What are the advantages and disadvantages of shorter-term influence efforts compared to those aimed at slowly broadening the base of supportive individuals or groups?

These questions also draw attention to other troublesome dilemmas of contemporary leadership practice. For example, how can we best explain the demonstration of loyalty to leaders and leadership behaviors in some circumstances that would be regarded as wholly unacceptable in other, seemingly comparable settings? How is it that certain actions by leaders – public bullying, the use of controversial and derogatory language, toxic behaviors, or even widespread sexual harassment or abuse – can be tolerated by followers in some circumstances, while these same behaviors result in swift and immediate action even when they occur in other less public and less consequential settings?

It is these questions, along with others, that inspired the development of the framework that will be presented and discussed in the pages ahead. For serious-minded scholars and practitioners of leadership and communication, there is a need for concepts and insights to help us make sense of the realities around us, some of which seem to depart quite

radically from what we would hope and expect to see from dedicated and educated leaders and those who follow and support them. We all can think of situations and scenarios in the workplace, community, and national or international scene – whether in politics, sports, religion, commerce, education, or the military – where these vexing questions and contradictions arise. We could easily refer to names and situations that illustrate these points, but we worry that the focus on micro-examples and particular individuals would create a narrower, situation- and time-bound frame than that which this work aspires to provide; however, specific examples will be shared in the pages ahead to help illustrate the connections to the language, concepts, and theoretical principles presented throughout this volume. We would also encourage readers to reflect on individuals and instances in their own spheres of experience that align with the ideas presented herein in order to personalize, operationalize, and make relevant the themes we present.

While discussions of particular instances of misalignment between what theories advise and what we observe, between presumed best practices and disturbing actual practices, between principles of morality that are seemingly ignored in some settings and emerge as preoccupations in others, can be interesting and important, what we intend to offer here is a more general analytic framework – one that transcends particular leaders, situations, and actions – to help explain cross-cutting leadership moments, experiences, and circumstances. We believe that there are ways of thinking about leadership, communication, and social influence – and the intersections among them – that have great potential to advance our understanding and ability to apply this knowledge at multiple levels, and across settings, circumstances, and sectors.

From our perspective, there is no coincidence that the study of leadership and communication share similar popular, professional, and academic histories and profiles. An understanding of each can greatly contribute to the ways in which we think about the fundamental facets of human behavior, particularly those involving attempts for social influence, and in this pursuit, both have been enhanced and also limited by their broad popularity. Our goal in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 is to provide an overview of some of the more critical and cross-cutting dimensions of communication and leadership theory, and in the remaining chapters, we will explore intersections between these two concepts as we advance a theoretical and integrative model of social influence, leadership, and communication that may be of value for personal, professional, and scholarly purposes.

SHIFTS IN CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP

Scholars have cautioned about the potential dangers of romanticizing the role of the leader (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Meindl, 1995; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). In this volume, we want to extend this caution not only to the impact of an individual leader on group and organizational dynamics, but also to our understanding of leadership communication, to the relationship between leaders and followers, and to the impact of followers on group and organizational dynamics. At the heart of this caution lies a concern about the inappropriateness of applying a linear model, whereby a leader's behavior could be thought to bring about consequences in followers or organizations in a rather direct, predictable, and causal manner. Rather than simply viewing this caution as an interesting tangential theme, the

reliance on a linear model of communication reflects a fundamental inadequacy in many popular and scholarly approaches to the study of leadership and followership dynamics, and in the communicative relationship between these roles.

As with the linear model of leadership, the traditionally popular view of communication effects has also been criticized for its oversimplification of what is more appropriately viewed as a more complex and nuanced process. Within the field of communication, these concerns have led to the introduction and application of other two-step flow models and systemic models (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). This evolution in communication thinking brings attention to and clarifies many important parallels and interdependencies between leadership and communication, many of which have important implications for understanding the dynamics associated with each of these processes and the relationship between the two, particularly as they relate to situations and circumstances involving social influence.

The S->M->C->R = E view of communication – a view of communication where the sender (S) delivers a message (M) through a channel (C) to one or more receivers (R) with a predictable effect (E) – provides an intuitive and easily understood explanation for interpersonal, group, organizational, public, and mass communication efforts. This message-sent, message-received view of communication is quite suitable for making sense of what happens when you provide a dining companion with a salt shaker in response to the request to “please pass the salt.” A linear view of communication seems to quite adequately explain the many transactional exchanges you may have with friends and family members or during meetings with members of a community organization or colleagues in the workplace. In these routine situations, a linear model provides a satisfactory explanation

for receiver behaviors that seem to result quite naturally from intentional messaging by a sender. But, when the underlying dynamics of human communication are analyzed, it becomes clear that senders do not unilaterally cause effects in receivers through their messages, and neither do the behaviors, actions, or messages of a leader guarantee an immediate creation of a supportive group of followers. Rather, the communication dynamics between leaders and followers, like those of sender and receiver, are only fully explained through an application of a nuanced view of communication in which the meaning and consequences of messages are understood to be co-created and the joint product of both short-term and long-term learning and interpretive processes by leaders and followers. Leader–follower dynamics are best viewed as a combined outcome of many interdependent factors, including leadership messages and actions; follower receptivity; and the unique conditions of a given context or historical moment that lead to the ignition and activation of anticipated and unanticipated reactions. Moreover, these outcomes may be the result of intentional and unintentional, coordinated and uncoordinated, or planned and unplanned communication.

In the pages ahead, we will explore and apply the topic of resonance, a central concept, we believe, for making sense of the co-creation of meaning between leader(s) and follower(s) in interpersonal, group, organizational, and public contexts. At its most basic level, leadership–followership dynamics are a reflection of the ways in which the perspectives, messages, and behaviors of a sender/leader and receiver/follower resonate (or fail to resonate) and the impact of this resonance on the responses and reactions that are (or are not) activated. In the absence of the anticipated resonance, leaders may treat this as an opportunity to engage in longer-term communication efforts with the goal of broadening the zone of resonance and cultivating new possibilities for activation. In our view, it

is through this kind of communication process that leaders and followers jointly create outcomes that so easily could be (and often are) attributed to the actions of a leader (or sender) alone.

Thus, our integrated theory of leadership communication centers on the processes that come into play when leaders engage with followers in a way that successfully or unsuccessfully resonates with and activates certain responses – and it is this interplay of resonance and activation that can help to explain the dynamics of what might otherwise look like linear, leader-directed social influence. Thus, a foundational theme advanced in this book – one with a broad range of implications and ramifications – is that social influence outcomes are ultimately defined through the extent and manner to which the interpretations of followers resonate with leaders and their designed messages, strategies, processes, and structures, making prominent the role of the follower in social influence processes.

Clearly, leaders fulfill a fundamental role in these processes, and their engagement serves as a *necessary* condition for realizing leadership outcomes, but followers provide the *sufficient* conditions, as do the environmental, organizational, and cultural elements that form the backdrop of any given communication encounter. Given this perspective, as much as it is important to exercise caution in glamorizing the leader's role in social influence, we must be equally cautious in avoiding the pejorative connotation that marginalizes or diminishes the role of followers or followership behaviors in shaping leadership outcomes. Followers – whether described as collaborators, colleagues, team or group members, stakeholders, or some other label – play an indispensable and easily undervalued role in shaping the outcomes that occur in interactions with those who are regarded as formal or informal leaders in any setting. Their role in social influence situations is critical,

as they are full collaborators – in some sense controlling partners – in the communication processes that underpin leadership–followership dynamics. According to Fiorina and Shepsle (1989), “*One cannot have leaders without followers, but going further, one cannot understand leadership without understanding followership*” (p. 36, emphasis in the original).

The decision to engage in leadership and/or followership behaviors often reflects the choices made by an individual or group of individuals – choices that often carry significant consequences and merit considerable thought and reflection. In the ongoing dynamics of social communication in team, group, organizational, and civic settings, the behaviors typically associated with leadership and followership rotate and revolve so quickly that the distinctive identities associated with these roles are very difficult to isolate (Keohane, 2010). In many cases, the leader–follower relationship is best characterized as a partnership, a collaboration, or a system – composed of interconnected, interdependent, and mutually causal components. Leadership, followership, and context intersect in a complex, fluid, and often unpredictable manner, all of which makes critical the focus on resonance, activation, and cultivation as they are interjected into social influence situations and circumstances.

Popularity as a Mixed Blessing

Leadership remains one of the more popular current topics, with tens of thousands of books and articles available on the subject, and tens of billions of dollars spent on the education and development of leaders and leadership behaviors across sectors (Association for Talent Development, 2018). It has become increasingly difficult to watch television news, read