

Rethinking leadership – a field theory perspective

- Conventional leadership models either celebrate the innate characteristics of those who lead or view leadership as distributed, emerging through the interactive dynamics of a social process rather than resident in a single person – a dichotomy of one or the other.
- Dr Morley Katz, Professor Frank Safayeni, and Dr Ahmad Tanehkar employ Lewin's Field Theory to rethink leadership.
- They argue that a synthesis between leader-centric views and social interaction perspectives is possible, ie, perception of leadership is based on the interaction of situational social forces, with the possibility that a single leader may emerge.
- Their research moves beyond the traditional focus on charismatic individuals or current social theories based on an underlying assumption of democracy and participation and has profound implications for leadership theory and practice.

Conventional perspectives and standard leadership models suggest that leaders are either born with innate qualities that predestine their path, or that leadership emerges through a democratic social process, shifting among different people based on interactive dynamics. In the first view, leadership is tied to inherent characteristics, while in the second, it is seen as a collaborative effort that varies depending on the situation. The former perspective may explain why political, sporting, cultural, religious, and business leaders are often venerated; the latter sees this simple individual attribution as an error. However, these perspectives don't fully capture the complex dynamics of social context acting in conjunction with individual dispositions and behaviours. As such, leadership research is ripe for a rethink.

Dr Morley Katz applies management science to guide CEOs and their executive teams in organisational design and effectiveness

and to tackle management and leadership challenges. With Professor Frank Safayeni and Dr Ahmad Tanehkar, senior researchers at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, he offers a revolutionary approach to understanding leadership that confronts the weaknesses in traditional leadership thinking and models.

The limitations of traditional leadership models

Traditional leadership theories often depict leaders as inherently charismatic individuals with distinct qualities that set them apart from their followers – leadership is a static attribute one either possesses or does not. More current theories focus on social units such as teams or on communication network perspectives. However, Katz, Safayeni, and Tanehkar, writing in the *Journal of Change Management*, argue that such models, which focus on either traits and positional authority or on social units, are fundamentally flawed in several ways.

Firstly, such models often overlook the complex interplay between the individual and the situational and relational aspects of leadership. By treating leadership as a function of traits, they ignore how different contexts can influence who emerges as a leader. And by focusing only on social process, they deny the potential emergence of a single leader. Additionally, they tend to equate leadership with positive moral values, suggesting that leadership is inherently good. This view disregards the fact that leaders can drive both beneficial and harmful outcomes.

Furthermore, these theories fail to differentiate between leadership and managerial effectiveness. This conflation limits our understanding of why leadership emerges in the first place. Management and leadership are different social relationships, with different sources of power and engaging in different social actions. Managerial power is inherently positional and institutionally conferred, while leadership power is personal and conferred by those who follow. Managers generally act in compliance with established directives and norms in a system, sometimes implementing incremental improvements, while leaders significantly challenge these norms and directives. According to Katz, Safayeni, and Tanehkar, a different perspective is needed to investigate

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For leadership to emerge, behaviours that challenge or resist challenge to the status quo must be invoked, sustained, and be seen to be meaningful in the eyes of a receptive collective.

The study’s emphasis on situational dynamics and the interactive nature of leadership, forging a synthesis between leader-centric views and social interaction perspectives, offers valuable insights for organisations seeking to foster leadership at all levels.

interaction patterns between individuals and their environment – or the field of forces within which individuals operate – and how these patterns are perceived by observers.

Lewin’s field theory: a revolutionary approach

Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in social psychology, developed such a field theory. His work emphasised the importance of understanding the totality of the social situation rather than isolating individual traits or behaviours. In their research, Katz, Safayeni, and Tanehkar apply Lewin’s field theory to leadership emergence, proposing that the perception of leadership is based on the interaction of situational social forces. They argue that meaningful challenges to the status quo – or resistance to such challenges – create a force field that influences group behaviour, and that these acts of challenge or resistance to challenge are fundamental to the perception of leadership. This force field is dynamic and constantly evolving, shaped by the actions and interactions of group members as well as environmental forces, social and physical, acting on the individuals.

The authors emphasise that these acts must be perceived as meaningful by the group

of urgency for change. During the changing stage, leaders must guide the group through the transition, managing the interplay of supporting and resisting forces. This involves implementing new norms and practices and addressing concerns and anxieties that may arise. The final stage, refreezing, involves solidifying the new norms and behaviours into stable patterns. Here, leaders must ensure that the changes are integrated into the group’s routines and practices.

The study’s emphasis on situational dynamics and the interactive nature of leadership offers valuable insights for organisations seeking to foster leadership at all levels. Organisations can create environments that encourage and support leadership behaviours by recognising that leadership can emerge from anyone within a group. This involves identifying and nurturing potential leaders and creating conditions for the meaningful challenge of existing norms. By their very nature, to maintain equilibrium, organisations are designed to suppress challenges to the status quo or tampering with norms and practices that stabilise the system, ie, they’re designed to suppress leadership emergence. For leadership to emerge, behaviours that meaningfully challenge or resist challenge to the status quo must be seen to be valid and legitimate and be supported and rewarded by CEOs and senior executives in appropriate circumstances. This is not general practice in organisational settings.

A paradigm shift in leadership understanding

Moving beyond the dichotomy of focus on charismatic individuals or on a distributed social process, Katz, Safayeni, and Tanehkar’s research represents a paradigm shift in our understanding of leadership. It provides a deeper understanding of how our perception of leadership emerges and evolves.

This perspective has profound implications for both leadership theory and practice. It challenges us to rethink how we identify and develop leaders, emphasising the importance of situational factors and the interactive nature of leadership. By fostering environments that support meaningful challenge to the status quo, organisations can unlock the leadership potential within their teams and drive sustained change.

In essence, this research underscores that leadership is not about the inherent qualities of a few but about the dynamic interactions within a social group. It is a social process through which anyone can show up as a leader if they have the capability to meaningfully challenge or resist challenge to a status quo in the eyes of a receptive collective in particular circumstances. It’s not about mysterious qualities and veneration, but rather valued actions in non-routine and unprogrammed situations.

Personal response

What is the one enduring misperception about leadership that requires consigning to the dustbin, and why?

Leadership is not about the occupation of a particular role nor the preserve of those roles (executive, managerial, political, religious, or other). It is a social phenomenon that emerges through meaningful challenge or resistance to challenge of the status quo and is dependent on the situation and the capabilities of individuals in that situation – no one is universally ‘a leader’. And no particular set of character traits, behavioural styles, or other properties is uniquely suited to leadership emergence.

What are some of the more damaging consequences of traditional models of leadership that celebrate the innate characteristics of those who lead?

Since the characteristics and capabilities needed to challenge or resist challenge to the status quo vary depending on the situation, celebrating so-called (and false) innate characteristics of leadership facilitates appointment and promotion of individuals into positions of influence and power in organisations and society who may very well be ill-suited to the circumstances, while precluding from power those who could actually have a needed and beneficial effect.

In your study, you use Henry Fonda’s character in the classic film ‘12 Angry Men’ as an example of leadership ‘emergence’. Could you explain this further?

Fonda’s character is a juror who, at the outset of deliberations, challenges the status quo assessment of the other 11 jurors who are convinced that a young boy, accused of killing his father, is guilty. He manages to get another juror to change his vote to not guilty through this initial challenge. And then through successive rounds of deliberations and voting, each ‘status quo’ juror changes his vote to ‘not guilty’ by accepting a meaningful challenge to what he had previously considered convincing testimony. Leadership migrates through various individuals during successive rounds depending on their expertise with respect to the issue being discussed. But Fonda’s character

provides the impetus to engage in deeper deliberations through his initial challenge and surfaces as needed at various times and especially again towards the end of the deliberations, demanding explanations of those remaining few holdouts who resist the challenges to the guilty verdict as to the logic of their reason to convict, until all finally relent and the jury unanimously finds the boy not guilty. In sustaining his challenges, he also accrues power conferred on him by those jurors who now see the boy as not guilty.

How do your leadership theories fit organisations striving to make their management team more diverse?

Since leadership emergence is dependent on meaningfully challenging or resisting challenge to the status quo in a given situation, who emerges as a leader is a function of the individual expertise and capabilities that they are able to bring to bear relevant to the particular challenge at hand. It follows that a management team comprised of individuals with significantly broad diversity of thinking and experience will likely be more robust in its ability to deal with emerging organisational challenges and opportunities that go beyond those routinely handled by the organisational system – opportunities for leadership vs management.

Briefly, how can organisations create environments that encourage and support leadership behaviours?

Since organisations are, by their very nature, designed to suppress challenges to the status quo and any tampering with the routines, practices, and norms that maintain organisational stability and equilibrium, it is critical for CEOs and senior executives to embrace, support, and reward those who demonstrate astute judgement and meaningfully challenge or resist challenge to the status quo in appropriate situations, and make this visible to staff. While it certainly is important for staff to conform to organisational practices and norms in general, striking a thoughtful balance between when to adhere to system directives and when to legitimately challenge or resist challenge is essential to cultivating leadership in organisations.



Details



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Bio

Dr Morley Katz is Managing Director of Management Matters. He combines a rigorous body of knowledge with a highly skilled and practical approach to organisational design, organisational effectiveness, management, and leadership. Since founding Management Matters in 1997, Morley has provided expert advice and trusted counsel to CEOs and senior executives in more than 125 organisations in various industries as well as in government and foundations in the not-for-profit sector.

Professor Frank Safayeni did his graduate studies with Alex Bavelas (a student of Lewin) in psychology. He has been a professor at the University of Waterloo since 1980. He has conducted research on a variety of topics such as introduction of new technology, manufacturing systems, concept maps, use of language in organisations, problem solving, subjective probability, and leadership.

Dr Ahmad Tanehkar is a behavioural economist specialising in data science and its application in economics and consumer behaviour. He works as a data scientist in industry, focusing on data analysis and machine learning modelling.

Further reading

Katz, M, Safayeni, F, Tanehkar, A, (2024) [What makes us see someone as a leader? A field theory approach.](#) *Journal of Change Management*, 24(3), 204–229.