

Overcoming Leadership Limitations: A Theoretical Study of Leadership Behaviors and Methods

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Abstract

Purpose: The main purpose of this study is to present leadership limitations that influence leadership effectiveness and examine if it is possible to overcome these limitations.

Methodology: The study presents the results of literature analyses and the findings of the recent research studies on leadership. It also refers to literature items that might be helpful in analyzing the leadership limitations.

Conclusions: The study indicates that some leadership behaviors that fall into a particular category are useful in understanding and reflecting on their limitations, while other leaders' actions enable them to overcome those limitations or use them to support leadership effectiveness.

Research limitations: This is a theoretical and conceptual study. It formulates propositions to further empirical research studies.

Originality: The study analyzes a number of behaviors from different leadership theories. These behaviors fall into four meta-categories: situational, transformational, authentic and boundary spanning. The study also provides information about leadership styles that are useful in understanding and overcoming leadership limitations.

Keywords: leadership, leadership limitations, bounded rationality, self-reflection

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| Introduction

Many experts have confirmed that organizations and societies are currently experiencing a lack of effective leadership, which is one reason for the economic, political and social crises appearing all over the world. Ironically, leaders today have much better access to information and knowledge than their predecessors did. However, today's executives are also facing the speed of transformation, scale and complexity in the world around them. They need to lead people of different cultures, regions, ranks and generations in both virtual and real-world environments. Thus, the task of providing leadership is far more unpredictable, complicated and challenging than ever before. Because of the leadership deficit, many managers, entrepreneurs, politicians and social activists are willing to lead. As a number of business schools and training centers offer educational leadership programs, executives often try to develop their leadership skills through these resources. However, the majority of them still find many ambiguous answers to their questions about effective leadership. That is why new and more sophisticated education methods are introduced like leadership group coaching (Kets de Vries et al., 2007).

In this study, I identify several leadership behaviors from different well-known and very popular theories. These behaviors fall into four categories: situational, transformational, authentic and boundary spanning. The first category concerns leaders' actions that are adjusted to each situation or their subordinates' skills and experience. The second is related to leaders' behaviors oriented to facilitating change. The third refers to self-reflection and empowerment. The fourth concentrates on leadership networks that enable individual development, task performance, and accomplishment of strategic goals.

I refer to Koźmiński's concept of constraints that appear on each path toward leadership (Koźmiński, 2013). I provide some examples of limitations and explain why leaders have to make irrational decisions and how these decisions affect leadership effectiveness.

I find that some leadership behaviors that fall into a particular category are useful in understanding and reflecting on their limitations, while other leaders' actions enable them to overcome those limitations or use them to support leadership effectiveness.

| Leadership Theories

A number of leadership theories have been introduced. They have some common features regarding leaders' behaviors; however many scholars point out that the behavior taxonomies demonstrate a lot of differences related to the type and the number of leadership actions involved (Yukl, 2012).

Earlier studies of leadership behavior (from 1950 to 1980) focused on explaining how leaders influence the attitudes and performance of their followers. Those studies provide the basis on which an important stream of research concerning situational leadership was created.

Theory of situational leadership

The contingency models of leadership, which were developed in the 1960s and 1970s, point at links between leadership style and situational variables. The Fiedler contingency model refers to a leader's effectiveness in a situational contingency. Two types of leaders are defined in this theory: one who aims at performing the task by developing good relationships with his or her team (relationship-oriented); and one who cares about the task accomplishment (task-oriented) (Fiedler, 1967). Both task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership behaviors can be effective, depending on the situation.

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) proposed the situational leadership model that assumes leaders should match the leadership style (telling, selling, delegating and participating) with the level of maturity of their followers.

Vroom, in collaboration with other scholars, developed five types of leader decision-making styles (strongly autocratic, autocratic, consultative, strongly consultative and group based). They depend on the importance of decision quality, structure of the problem, sufficient information necessary for subordinates to make a quality decision and importance of subordinate commitment to the decision (Vroom and Yetton, 1973, Vroom and Jago, 2007).

House (1971) presented the path-goal theory stating that a leader's style (directive, supportive, delegating or participating) depends on the task and the subordinates' preferences. The revised version, based on the work environment of an organization (unknown technology or conflicts), proposes two additional leadership styles: work facilitation and interaction facilitation (House, 1996).

More recent studies on situational leadership focused on the combination of leadership style and work environment (Thamhain and Wilemon, 1977) or project type (Turner and Muller, 2003, Shenhar and Dvir, 2007).

Theory of transformational leadership

Studies on leadership behaviors that focused on encouraging and facilitating change gained attention in the 1980s while developing transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985), which has been also termed as visionary (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989) and charismatic (Conger, 1989). One of the first scholars who described transformational leadership was Burns. He defined it as a process in which the leader and the followers engage in a two-way process of increasing motivation (Burns, 1978). Bass developed this concept explaining that transformational leaders are able to influence their followers to release their potential for better performance toward the goals of their organization. Moreover, he referred to transactional leadership, which in contrast to the

transformational style, is characterized by its central focus on the provision of material rewards to employees in return for their effort (Bass, 1985).

More recent studies on transformational leaders suggested the following behaviors (Bass, 1999, Avolio et al., 1999, Northouse, 2001):

- Individualized Consideration – coaching, mentoring, listening to followers' needs, giving support and keeping communication open.
- Intellectual Stimulation – challenging assumptions, taking risks, soliciting followers' ideas, stimulating and encouraging creativity among their followers.
- Inspirational Motivation – articulating a vision that is appealing and inspiring to followers, communicating optimism about future goals and providing meaning for the task at hand.
- Idealized Influence – providing a role model for highly ethical behavior, gaining respect and trust.

The concept of three faces of leadership, which is very close to the transformational theory, concludes that there are three aspects of leadership (Hatch et al., 2009). First, leaders need to be goal-directed and well-organized, referred to as the face of the manager. Second, executives should reach beyond the rational level to address creativity, change, vision and group identity and in this way, display the face of the artist. Third, leaders must instill values and faith into their organization and this also requires the face of the priest.

Theory of authentic leadership

Henderson and Hoy (1983) are the authors of one of the earliest theories of leadership authenticity and inauthenticity. Other scholars also distinguished *authentic* transformational leaders from *pseudo* (or *personalized*) transformational leaders who lacked authenticity (Avolio and Gibbons, 1988; Howell and Avolio, 1992; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999).

In the 2000s, publications by Bill George (George, 2003; George, 2007) gathered a lot of interest from both practitioners and scholars in authentic leadership. Thanks to George's professional experience, his conception reflects many issues of other definitions in the leadership literature. According to George's concept, several dimensions in authentic leadership include knowing the authentic self, learning from one's life story, integrating all elements of life (work, family, community and friends), building support teams, balancing the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, practicing personal values and empowering people to lead. A theory of authentic leadership was developed by Luthans and Avolio (2003) who pointed out that authentic leaders should be self-aware, transparent and consistent in their core beliefs and values.

Later, scholars presented increasingly complex models of authentic leadership, with special attention paid to the relationship between leadership and employee attitudes and behaviors

including commitment, performance and well-being (Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies et al., 2005).

According to the most recent theories, there are four main factors that influence authentic leadership: self-awareness, transparency, balanced processing and ethics (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

The current perspectives on self-awareness in leadership literature are similar but not identical. For George (2003), self-awareness is related to knowing an individual's passions, values and underlying motivations. Kouzes and Posner (2002) argued that one's own personal values are the key to self-awareness and leadership authenticity. Other scholars explained that self-awareness means that leaders know what is important for them (May et al., 2003), whether it is values, emotions, identity, goals or motives and leaders need to be fully aware of these priorities (Gardner et al., 2005).

Transparency refers to demonstrating one's authentic self to other people. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) distinguished between transformational and pseudo-transformational leadership by explaining the true self in terms of the values that shape a leader's motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. George (2003) underlined that leaders should practice their values under different conditions (especially under pressure) and in various environments (with family, friends and co-workers). Gardner et al. (2005) argued that authentic leaders need to find a balance between expressing their true emotions to followers and minimizing the display of their negative feelings. Hughes (2005) suggested that relational transparency comes as a result of a leader's self-disclosure of goals, identity, values and emotions.

Balanced processing is related to a leader's ability to consider multiple sides of an issue at hand and analyze various pieces of relevant information before making a decision. George (2003) referred to the ability of taking criticism and conducting analysis of what others think. Gardner et al. (2005) argued that authentic leaders have a stable sense of self, which enables them to consider views that challenge their own positions. A leader who pays attention to a follower's views can create a sense of ownership and identification with ideas and decisions that facilitate a subordinate's engagement (Wagner et al., 2003).

Moral perspective is the fourth component of authentic leadership as underlined by many scholars (May et al., 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). It refers to an integrated form of self-regulation that is guided by internal moral standards and values, versus externally derived standards such as those from one's social group, current society or organization. Leaders should be able to resist social pressures and act according to their own values. Sparrowe (2005) suggested that self-regulation means that one's words are spoken through the inner voice and that one's behavior reflects inner purpose and values. In the presence of value-based behavior, subordinates identify more with the leader and show more engagement in tasks assigned by that leader (Avolio et al., 2004).

Theory of boundary-spanning leadership

In most of the earlier studies on leadership, scholars focused on the influence that leaders can have on their followers and on the internal activities in an organization. Thus, few leadership researchers examined external behaviors. However in the 1970s and 1980s, research on managers found that interaction with peers, subordinates, coworkers and clients distinguishes effective leaders from their counterparts (Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1990).

Later research pointed out that networks help in task performance and self-development (Ibarra, 1993). To establish new connections between individuals and groups or to strengthen existing relationships, effective leaders should find their role within social networks (Sidle and Warzynski, 2003). Ibarra and Hunter (2007) described the following types of networking that are crucial for leaders: 1) operational that supports leaders in task performance; 2) personal that enables self-development; and 3) strategic that helps leaders figure out future goals and get stakeholder support for them. Most recent studies describe three boundary-spanning leadership behaviors (Ernst and Yip, 2009; Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011):

- Managing boundaries, which helps leaders understand boundaries and the importance of belonging in a meaningful distinct group;
- Forging common ground, which enables leaders to recognize, respect and validate differences between people in a group and integrating them into a larger whole; and
- Discovering new frontiers, which support leaders in exploring the opportunities that are created by working together.

All of the previously mentioned theories considered a few types of leadership, which are related to the application of different leadership behaviors (Table 1). Thus, each leadership style can be described by the following categories: situational, transformational, authentic and boundary-spanning.

| Leadership limitations

Leadership actions from the Koźmiński concept were also included in Table 1 to show the scope of the leadership behaviors evaluated in the study and to underline that in spite of high evaluations in those behaviors, participants still experienced different limitations in their leading processes (Koźmiński, 2013).

It is not difficult to notice that even very experienced, well-known and reputable leaders undertake irrational behaviors because they are experiencing a number of limitations that prevent executives from choosing optimal solutions. The following examples illustrate some irrational behaviors:

Table 1 | Overview of leadership styles

Leadership style	Hersey and Blanchard (1969)	Fiedler (1967)	Vroom and Yetton, (1973); Vroom and Jago (1988)	Kozminski, (2013)
Situational style	Telling	Task oriented	Strongly autocratic	Mobilizing followers
	Delegating		Autocratic/consultative	
	Selling	Relationship oriented	Strongly consultative	
	Participating		Group based	
	Bass (1999)	Hatch et al., (2009)		
Transformational style	Coaching, mentoring, supporting	Manager		
	Stimulating and encouraging creativity	Artist		Developing vision
	Articulating a vision			Creating values
	Providing an ideal role	Priest		
	George (2003)	Avolio et al., (2004) Gardner et al., (2005) Walumbwa et al. (2008)		
Authentic style	Knowing the authentic self	Self-awareness behaviors		Self-reflection
	Learning from life story			
	Balancing the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations	Transparency behaviors		
	Integrating all elements of life			
	Empowering			
	Building teams			
	Practicing personal values	Ethic behaviors		
		Balanced processing		Predicting
Boundary-spanning style	Ibarra and Hunter (2007)	Ernst and Chrobot- Mason (2011)		
	Operational networking	Discovering new frontiers		
	Personal networking	Forging common ground		
	Strategic networking	Managing boundaries		Mobilizing followers

Source: Fiedler (1967), Hersey and Blanchard (1969), Vroom and Yetton (1973), Bass (1999), Avolio et al. (2004), Gardner et al. (2005), Ibarra and Hunter (2007), Hatch et al. (2009), Walumbwa et al. (2008), Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011), Koźmiński (2013).

- A political leader does not hire the best candidate for a position because he or she represents a vision of a political group that supports another candidate.
- A coach decides to give a chance to the star player who is the coach's friend and is selected for the game in spite of that he or she is in poor condition.
- A CEO stimulates and empowers an employee who secretly negotiates an employment contract with a competitive company.
- A religious leader does not take the risk of an unpopular decision so as to play an ideal role model for his or her followers.

All of these irrational behaviors are in line with a few reputable leadership theories. However, one can categorize them, at least to some extent, as ineffective and irrational actions. One also needs to point out that these activities can be the most satisfactory solutions, while taking different limitations into consideration.

Kozminski (2013) conducted his studies among senior executives, top politicians, religious, sports and art leaders. These participants experienced different types of limitations: political, cultural, ethical, emotional, motivational, institutional and informational.

Political limitations

Political limitations are related not only to a political environment; leaders experience corporate politics and power plays in companies all over the world (Pfeffer, 2010). Executives need to adjust the power exercised with their internal competitors, which involves negotiating resources and creating coalitions. This usually constrains the room for leadership action. It happens often that a political leader or a CEO of a large corporation needs to promote an employee who is not the best candidate for the position. Even if he coached, mentored or supported another candidate in the past, the leader is forced to empower a candidate favored by a coalition. This could negatively affect employee motivation, but this is the price of power plays and politics in the organization.

Networking scholars indicate that boundary-spanning leadership behaviors help to win power plays inside and outside the company (Ibarra, 1993). This leads to a proposition:

Proposition 1: Boundary spanning leadership behaviors are useful to overcome political limitations for leadership effectiveness.

Ethical limitations

Ethical limitations indicate that a leader is not able to act according to ethical values. For example, Jack Welch, the former CEO of GE, is still considered to be one of the best managers in history. In 1999, *Fortune* magazine described him as a "manager of the century." However, GE was

involved in many unethical practices such as dumping toxic substances into the Hudson River for many years. Some scholars concluded that Welch was very successful in increasing the financial value of GE, but in some situations he did not pay special attention to social responsibility and ethics (Corbett, 2004; Veiga, 2004). The current CEO of GE, Jeffrey Immelt, chose a different approach regarding social responsibility.

Authentic leadership theory refers to ethics and explains how to practice values in extreme situations (George, 2007; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This leads to another proposition:

Proposition 2: Authentic leadership behaviors are useful in overcoming ethical limitations to leadership effectiveness.

Cultural limitations

According to Schein (1990), culture is the most difficult issue to change in an organization. Leaders have a great role in creating the organizational culture (Schein, 2006). However, when they instill some cultural norms among their subordinates, it is very likely that these norms will be related to leadership limitations in the future. Hofstede (2010) stated that there are national cultural characteristics that influence the behavior of organizations and identified five dimensions of culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity and long vs. short term orientation. For example, if a leader works in an organization that favors individualism and competition, he or she needs to apply his or her goals and desires and thus value independence and self-reliance.

Transformational leadership behaviors are oriented to facilitate change (Bass, 1999). Since organizational culture is an organizational attribute and is extremely difficult to change, this leads to another proposition:

Proposition 3: Transformational leadership behaviors are useful in overcoming cultural limitations in leadership.

Emotional limitations

The role of emotions in leadership has been rarely considered in leadership literature. This is not surprising as many scholars have indicated that emotions are related to irrational behavior and decision making (Albrow, 1992; Baumeister et al., 2007). Emotions can be defined as high-intensity feelings that are triggered by either internal or external stimuli and interrupt cognitive behaviors and processes (Simon, 1982; Forgas, 1992). On one hand, researchers state that emotions positively influence leadership effectiveness (George and Bettenhausen, 1990, Volmer, 2012); on the other hand, emotions often cause irrational behaviors.

Moreover, it is possible to undertake steps to manage emotions. Capabilities concerning self-management of leaders' feelings have been addressed by emotional intelligence studies. Experts support the assertion that self-awareness is a key factor influencing emotional intelligence (Shipper and Davy, 2002) and serves as the foundation for the emotional development necessary to achieve success (Goleman, 2006). This leads to another proposition:

Proposition 4: Authentic leadership behaviors are useful to overcome emotional limitations in leadership.

Motivational limitations

Some leadership scholars have stated if there is one trait that all successful leaders have, it is motivation (Goleman, 2003). George (2007) has pointed two types of motivations: extrinsic, when a leader is motivated by salary, rewards or status that comes from working for a well-known company or having an impressive position title; and intrinsic, when a leader is involved in personal development, helping others to grow and making a difference in the world. Successful leaders need to find a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

Many scholars indicate the importance of leaders knowing about inner purpose and passion in leadership effectiveness (Love, 2012). However, even if a leader wants to be passionate about the job, he or she also experiences several motivational limitations. For example, many MBA graduates from top business schools are forced to take positions that enable them to pay back their huge loans (Byrne, 2012). As such, they care more about financial rewards than passion. Furthermore, many senior managers try to find a work-life balance. It can influence an individual's motivation to perform some additional tasks at work. Scholars indicate that finding a motivational balance depends on knowing ones-self (George, 2003) while others point at transformational behaviors that moderate the negative relationship of time pressures to work-life balance (Syrek et al., 2013). This leads to another proposition:

Proposition 5: Authentic and transformational leadership behaviors are useful in overcoming motivational limitations in leadership.

Informational limitations

A number of studies confirmed Simon's hypothesis about human cognitive limits (Galbraith, 1974). Thus, the rationality of human behavior is bounded by information processing capabilities (March, 1978). When one takes leaders into consideration, the information collection process also has some constraints, especially in the professional environment of today. A few decades ago, some successful leaders collected information about the organization and their employees while walking the hallways (Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1990; Eccles and Nohria, 1991).

However, current organizations do not function in the same way. Hallways have been replaced by a variety of sophisticated communication methods, such as online networking platforms or mobile systems (Korzyński, 2013). It can be concluded that leaders who want to be effective in the communication process must adapt to the new working environment. Moreover, they need to adjust their leadership styles (Korzyński, 2012); otherwise they will experience huge limitations in access to information. This leads to another proposition:

Proposition 6: Situational and boundary spanning leadership behaviors are useful in overcoming informational limitations for leadership effectiveness.

Knowledge limitations

How can one develop leadership knowledge and competencies? Some knowledge of leadership can be acquired by taking part in training, observing other leaders, practicing leadership at work, studying leadership concepts and self-reflection. Many leadership scholars have indicated that successful leaders are talented in self-reflection, self-observation and self-analysis (Kets de Vries, 2004; Gardner et al., 2005). Furthermore, it was stated that before a leader can lead others, he or she has to lead him or herself. Thus, it is necessary to discover who one is and what one cares about. It is possible through self-analysis process that also enables leaders to understand their limitations. Authentic leadership behaviors refer to knowing the authentic self and learning from one's life story. This leads to another proposition:

Proposition 7: Authentic leadership behaviors are useful in understanding different limitations for leadership effectiveness.

| Discussion

All the previously described limitations can affect leadership performance. Even if leaders are sometimes forced to undertake irrational behaviors, it is extremely important to know these limitations and try to overcome them to increase leadership effectiveness. I would like to explain my idea in reference to such situations:

- A political leader undertakes networking activities so as to promote the best candidate among members of his or her political group;
- A coach decides to analyze the relationship with a star player and have an honest conversation with the player explaining that he or she is still on the list of players for the future games, but in the current game the best ones need to get the chance to play;
- A CEO listens and talks with a number of employees, clients and suppliers using both online and offline methods of communication to collect information and make the right decisions about his or her subordinates;

- A religious leader does not take a risk of an unpopular decision so as to be an ideal role model for his or her followers. Thanks to the ideal image of a leader, a religion leader is able to influence a broader audience on important matters when significant support is needed.

These situations explain how leaders can try to overcome political, emotional, informational and ethical limitations while undertaking boundary-spanning, authentic, situational and transformational behaviors. In reality, similar situations can occur but usually they are more complex. That is why it is very likely that a mix of leadership behaviors is needed to overcome limitations or apply them to support leadership performance. However, it is important to state that before a leader is able to challenge some limitations, he or she needs to understand them. Thus, leadership starts with an inner journey of self-reflection.

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