

**Surfacing the Iceberg of Leadership:  
A New Taxonomy of Leadership Concepts and Theories**

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**Abstract**

Leadership scholars have long sought to impose order on the numerous theories in leadership literature. While mid-level theories abound, no taxonomy exists to provide hierarchy and a mechanism for explaining how theories interrelate. This poster offers a new taxonomy for organizing leadership theories and concepts based on the metaphor of an iceberg. It invites leadership scholars to vet their own leadership courses and undergraduate leadership programs to determine the depth to which they explore leadership.

**Introduction/Need for Idea**

Leadership scholars have long sought to impose order on the numerous and sundry traits, skills, behaviors, styles, approaches, and other concepts and theories in the leadership literature. Northouse (2013) organizes his taxonomy to mirror the chronological progression of academic research (e.g., traits approach, skills approach, etc.); Jackson and Parry (2011) organize their taxonomy by the primary focus of the theory (e.g., leader-centered perspectives, follower-centered perspectives, and distributed perspectives).

While these taxonomies are useful for summarizing and critiquing the literature, they do not offer a hierarchy of leadership concepts, nor do they adequately explain how concepts may interrelate — there is little integration of the many mid-level theories (Bass, 1990; Chemers, 2000; Yukl, 2006). This can leave leadership students unsure of how to integrate the theories and concepts presented in leadership courses. It can also leave undergraduate and, particularly, graduate leadership programs without a clear progression of coursework.

In this abstract, I offer a new taxonomy of leadership concepts in an attempt to provide a clear hierarchy for leadership literature and a framework for discussing the interrelatedness of both longstanding and emergent leadership concepts and theories. I use the metaphor of an iceberg because: (a) it provides a conceptual model for moving from a more superficial, surface level understanding of leadership to a more fundamental, deeper understanding of leadership, and (b) it implies that we often only scratch the surface of leadership in our courses and programs.

**Methodology**

Fleishman and Quaintance (1984) identify three basic principles of taxonomic science required of any classification effort. First, articulate an explicit definition of each domain. Second, establish the defining variables of each domain. Third, provide a mechanism for the evaluation of

the classification scheme. These basic principles, combined with a review of leadership literature, were utilized to establish the following taxonomy.

### **How It Works/Steps**

The proposed taxonomy has six levels. From the most superficial, surface level, to the most fundamental, deepest level, they are: (a) Leader Identity, (b) Leader Strategy, (c) Leader-on-follower Forces, (d) Follower-on-leader Forces, (e) Complexity Forces, and (f) Biological Forces. I begin with the most fundamental, deepest level and continue through the most superficial, surface level.

#### **Biological Forces**

Biological Forces is defined as innate biological conditions in humans that predispose us to seek out and engage with others in groups. This level is concerned with understanding the biological factors that result in the universality of leadership — the idea that leadership is a universal phenomenon in humans (Bass & Bass, 2009). Humans evolved as group-living animals, and, according to evolutionary psychology, developed universal needs that drive individual and group behavior: (a) attention and approval, (b) status hierarchy, and (c) meaning, structure, and order (Hogan, Curphy, Kaiser, & Chamorro-Premuzic, In Press). This level forms the fundamental conditions for humans interacting to manifest leadership across all cultures and all time.

#### **Complexity Forces**

Complexity Forces borrows its definition from complexity science, which is the process by which “emergent structures are produced by a combination of microdynamic...and macrodynamic forces” (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001, p. 392). This level is concerned with understanding the phenomena by which myriad interactions of humans lead to the emergence of structures and behaviors that we recognize as leadership and the products of leadership (e.g., organizations, social movements, communities) in our society. This level includes such frameworks as complexity leadership theory (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). If Biologic Forces provides the innate desire to engage in leadership, Complexity Forces provides the mechanism that translates those micro-level interactions of humans into identifiable macro-level structures.

#### **Follower-on-Leader Forces**

Follower-on-Leader Forces is defined as societal forces that serve to select, enable, constrain, or otherwise influence leaders in a given society. This level focuses on the manner and degree to which societal forces influence who is chosen as a leader and how, such as discursive elements that inform society’s understanding of what a leader is, what leadership should be, and how followers should orient themselves to leaders in a particular time period (Western, 2013). It is also concerned with the manner in which followers, *en masse*, seek to extract from leaders their universal needs described above. Examples include Heifetz’s (1998) concept of flight to authority.

#### **Leader-on-Follower Forces**

Leader-on-Follower Forces is defined as individual forces that serve to influence thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in followers. This level is concerned with the influence of individual leaders on followers, and the manner in which leaders provide for the universal needs of followers described above. This level includes such theories as transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985).

### **Leader Strategy**

Leader Strategy is defined as recognized and accepted social mechanisms utilized by leaders and followers, together. This level focuses on the practices, processes, and organizational structures put in place by leaders with followers' consent in a given society and time. This includes Path-Goal Theory (House, 1971), but also the many normative forms of organizational interaction, such as teams, communities, and social movements, as well as more hierarchical or more ecological organizations.

### **Leader Identity**

Leader Identity is defined as the personal, internalized amalgamation of traits, skills, and behaviors that a given society in time believes a leader should possess. This level focuses on identifying individuals as leaders, with particular attention paid to the evolutionary nature of this phenomenon across time and culture. This level includes such theories as traits approach (e.g., Stogdill, 1948) and skills approach (e.g., Katz, 1955).

### **Implications/Future Plans/Advice to Others**

It is likely that a majority of leadership theories and, no doubt, leadership education programs focus on the most superficial of levels (i.e., Leader Identity, Leader Strategy, and Leader-on-Follower Forces), as these are the levels most immediate to the needs of those wishing to engage in leadership. However, the more fundamental three levels provide tremendous context for our understanding of leadership and predictive power for what trends may come.

While this taxonomy certainly needs refinement, it may provide a useful instrument to gauge the level of depth undergraduate and graduate leadership education programs plumb, as well as a guide for organizing content in individual courses. Future plans include further development of the taxonomy according to Fleishman and Quaintance's (1984) method, including more robust descriptors of each domain's variables and a method of evaluating the system.

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