

Followership and Discourse(s) Over Time

By Eric K. Kaufman, Ira Chaleff, and Israel Oyedare

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Abstract

While scholars have documented distinct leadership discourses through the ages, less attention has been given to potential complementary or parallel followership discourses. This session will leverage the brain trust of conference participants to develop a preliminary outline or typology of followership discourse(s). The session will begin with creation of a timeline of relevant historical events, which will inform a World Café discussion of how followership has evolved over time. The session will close with discussion of insights gained and potential for future application.

Session Learning/Participant Objectives

This session is for everyone who has considered the role and evolution of followership in society. The specific objectives include:

1. Document societal events over the past century that shaped perspectives on followership.
2. Explore the relevance of discourse(s) for interpreting followership research and practice.
3. Uncover preliminary themes associated with followership discourse(s) over time.

Background & Overview of Session Idea

In Chaleff's (2021) book, *A Celebration of Followership*, he outlines his own exploration into the field of followership, beginning with documents from 1983 and continuing through the first two decades of the new millennium. Chaleff's introduction to the book includes the following framing:

The researchers, educators, practitioners, trainers and coaches who are engaged with the subject of followership are a highly motivated group that understand the power of the subject to change the way leadership is done and to improve the results. Nevertheless, when you talk with them, there is also a sense that much of the world still doesn't know about followership or sufficiently value it. There is truth in this statement. But it is not the entire truth. (Chaleff, 2021, p. i)

Within *A Celebration of Followership*, Chaleff (2021) documents places in the world where followership—and courageous followership in particular—has made an impact. Due to the book's focus on Chaleff's (2009) model of courageous followership, it conveys only limited insight on broader perspectives and the longer history of followership. In contrast, the leadership literature includes helpful frameworks for understanding diverse perspectives on leadership over time. For example, based on a meta-analysis of historical, socio-political, and economic perspectives, Western (2019) identified prominent discourses of leadership during the past century (Figure 1). The model conveys major shifts in the aggregated understanding of what

leadership is, and what a leader should be. A more detailed representation (Figure 2) maps both leadership theory and societal events to the leadership discourses (Morrison, 2012). More recently, Salicru (2019) articulated “four waves of leadership,” including leader-centered models, relational leadership, pluralistic leadership, and leadership-as-practice. For each representation of leadership, we can consider corresponding perspectives on followership. In particular, it could be helpful for the followership community to respond to the following questions:

- Considering insights from Ira Chaleff’s (2021) book, *A Celebration of Followership*, what might we discern about how perspectives on followership have evolved over time?
- If we accept the leadership discourses identified by Simon Western, what would be corresponding followership discourses?
- Considering Salicru’s four waves of leadership, how might we articulate the “waves” of followership in recent decades?

Among facilitation techniques appropriate for gleaning insight from groups, the World Café Method is a particularly promising tool for promoting and facilitating dialogue. The use of powerful questions focuses inquiry, surfaces assumptions and biases, and opens up new possibilities for ideas and meaning (Brown et al., 2005). As noted by FSG (2021), “The World Café method is particularly useful when you want to be sure to explore a topic from multiple perspectives, to ensure that everyone in a room contributes in a conversation, and/or when you want to encourage participants to make new connections” (p. 1). Furthermore, World Café has been embraced as a participatory research method because “it not only produces data for the researchers but also has the potential to benefit the participants, as it facilitates dialogue and mutual learning, thus motivating their participation and responses” (Löhr et al., 2020, p. 1). According to the World Café Community Foundation (2022), World Café can take a variety of forms, but it generally includes the following components:

- 1) *Setting*: The host creates a “special” environment, often modeled after a café (e.g., small round tables covered with a checkered tablecloth, butcher block paper, and colored pens). The ideal grouping includes four chairs at each table.
- 2) *Welcome and Introduction*: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the café etiquette, and putting participants at ease.
- 3) *Small-Group Rounds*: The process includes multiple 15- or 20-minute rounds of conversation for small groups seated around a table. At the end of each round, the participants move to different tables, though one individual may remain at the table to serve as the “table host” for the next round.
- 4) *Questions*: Each round is prefaced with a question specially crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the World Café. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they may build upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.

- 5) *Harvest*: After the small groups (and/or in between rounds, as needed), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group.

Additional facilitation guidance is provided in the World Café Community Foundation's (2015) *Quick Reference Guide for Hosting World Café*.

Related to the exploration of followership discourses over time, it may be helpful to begin by acknowledging some resistance to followership identity and exploring dynamic representations of followership (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2019). While some scholars have aligned followership with humans' evolution (e.g., Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019), Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) noted that leadership researchers have historically viewed followers through one of five lenses: (1) Leader centric (followers as recipients or moderators of leader influence in producing outcomes), (2) Follower-centric (followers construct leaders and leadership), (3) Relational view (followers engage with leaders in a mutual influence process), (4) Role-based followership (leader as recipient or moderator of follower influence in producing outcomes), or (5) Constructionist followership (followers as co-creators with leaders of leadership). Even still, there is value in considering societal perspectives on followership, particularly as they relate to historical events (Carsten et al., 2014). Accordingly, it can be helpful to create a timeline of events associated with followership, including acknowledgement of the relationship to Nazi Germany (1933-1945), the Jonestown Massacre (1978), the Tiananmen Square Protests (1989), and the Arab Spring (2010). The followership community may surface a wide variety of reference points, helping to uncover the foundations of our contemporary understanding of followership. As highlighted in Baker's (2007) review of literature: "The field of followership has a rich and complex body of literature spanning the previous century.... Yet there is even more to be established within the literature and the field of practice" (p. 58). This session of the Global Followership Conference will continue that work.

Session Outline with Audience Participation

The structure and flow of the session will be as follows:

- Introduction to the concept of discourses, including related frameworks (10 minutes).
- Creation and curation of a followership timeline through session participants' contributions to a sticky wall (15 minutes).
- World Café on followership discourses (three rounds of 15 minutes each).
- Whole room discussion and debrief of prominent themes emerging from the World Café (10 minutes).
- Wrap-up and dialogue about opportunities for future application (10 minutes).

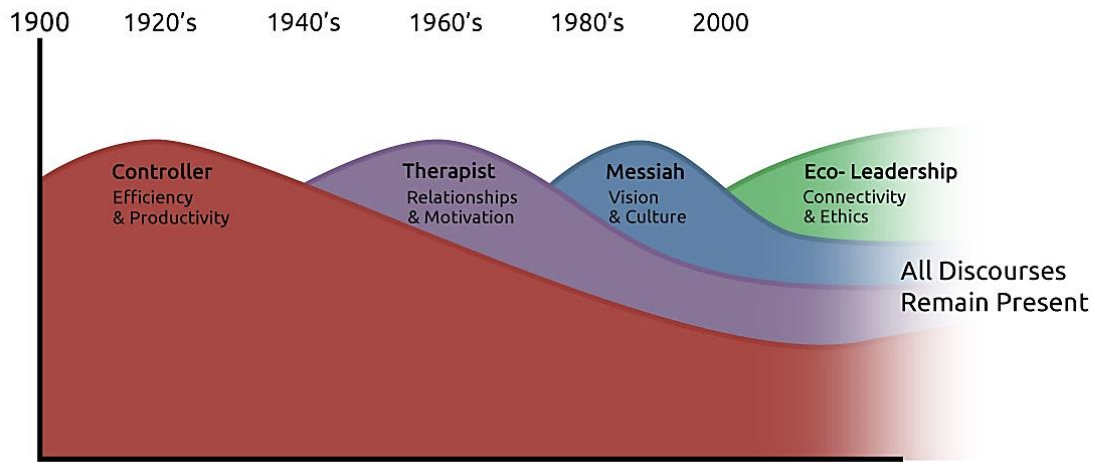
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Figure 1

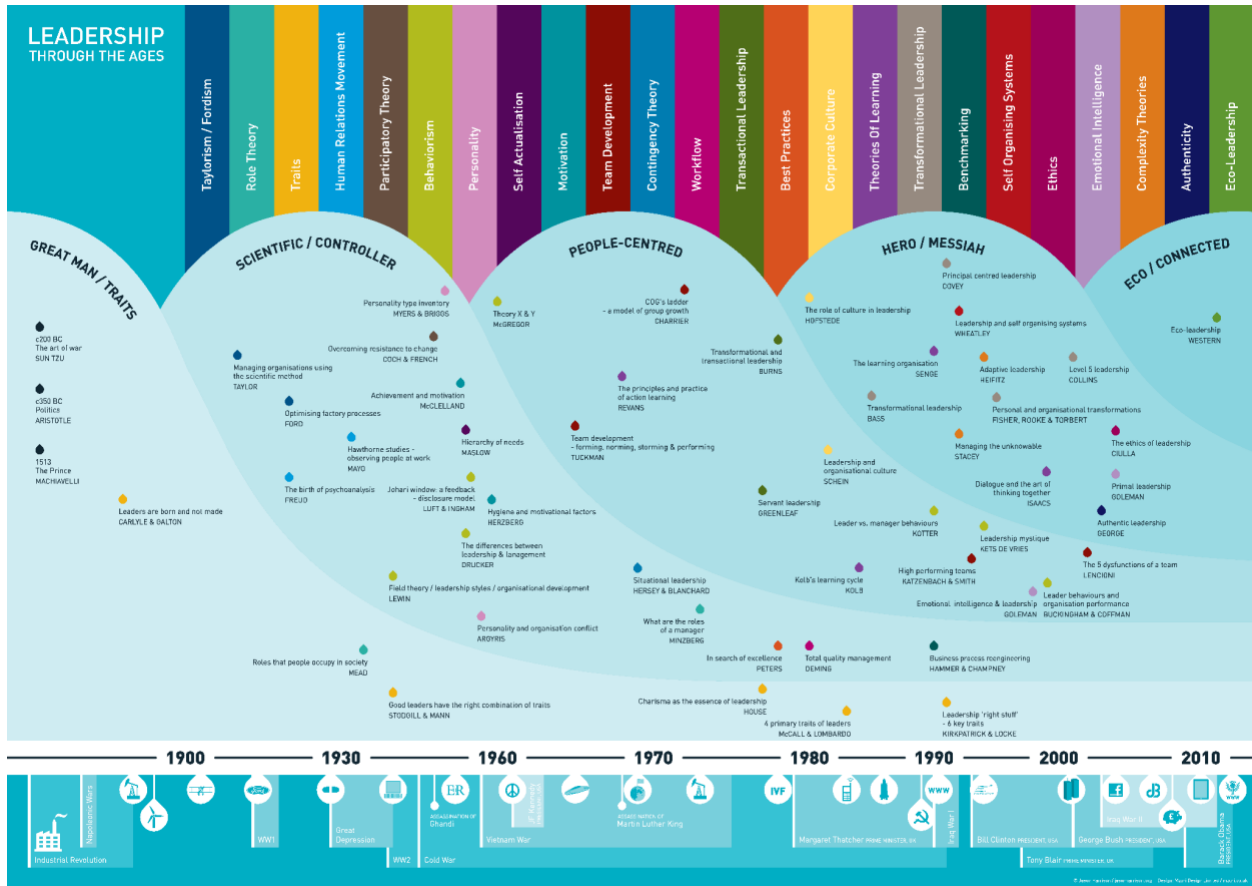
Discourses of Leadership Over Time



Note. From *The Discourses of Leadership* by Simon Western, 2015

(https://en.everybodywiki.com/File:Discourses_of_leadership.png). In the public domain.

Figure 2
Leadership Through the Ages



Note. From M. Morrison's (2012) blog <https://rapidbi.com/leadership-through-the-ages/>, credited to Mzuri Design – <http://www.mzuridesign.co.uk/blog/general/leadership-through-the-ages/>