

Leadership: What's the point of theory?

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As an academic delivering leadership programmes to practitioners in sports organisations and small businesses, this is a question I am often asked. If you pick up a text on leadership you will see that there is no real consensus on what leadership is and there is no secret recipe for what makes the perfect leader. This can lead to a practitioner view that theory doesn't really relate to reality and it belongs in an ivory tower. However, the lack of consensus just reflects the reality that leadership is complex and messy because it means different things to different people.

At a basic level, a theory is a set of ideas that aims to explain something. A range of leadership theories have been established over the last century and these include theories that explain the specific traits of a leader, how a leader behaves, how situations influence leadership approach and theories that endeavour to explain the relationship between leaders and their followers. My experience of working with students and practitioners on leadership programmes has highlighted that an understanding of these leadership theories can be powerful in helping us make sense of the leadership practices around us and our own leadership approach.

We are likely to have experienced and observed leadership right from childhood and throughout our lives. This includes our own day-to-day practice of leadership and our observations of the leadership approach of our parents, friends, teachers, coaches and others that we interact with. We may consider those leaders as effective or not, but, along with our own experiences of being a leader, they are likely to have been influential in creating our own implicit theory of leadership.

Understanding theories of how we learn about leadership helps us understand our own assumptions and enables us to reflect on why we lead in the way that we do and why we prefer some leaders to others. Particularly important is that it also enable us to understand that if I have my own theory of leadership then so will others, thus it is important to understand our followers' own views of what an effective leader is.

Furthermore, if we have mainly experienced leadership in one context, such as within a particular sport, then we may have a limited set of observations and experiences to learn from. In a recent workshop using theories of leadership learning with cricket players, there was a realisation by some of the participants that their learning about leadership had primarily come from cricket and there would be value in gaining an understanding of how leadership is practiced in other contexts.

The critical point is that theories of leadership provide frameworks to enable us to step back and make sense of the approach of a particular leader or how leadership has been enacted in a particular situation or our own leadership practice. This can help us navigate the complexity and when working in teams a shared understanding of leadership theory also provides a common language from which to reflect, discuss or even challenge.

We can also use these frameworks to help make sense of a situation that we are faced with and, although theory does not create a paint-by-numbers approach, it does enable us to think through a strategy of the leadership approach we might take.

By gaining some understanding of theory we can also gain more confidence in our own leadership approach as we can use it to develop self-awareness and quite often we can recognise our own

approach within a particular theory. Finally, leadership theory helps us understand that there is no perfect approach to leadership.

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