

Contemporary Perspectives on Leadership Learning

# Leadership Theories, Frameworks, and Approaches in Practice



Edited by

**Kathy L. Guthrie**  
**Rich Whitney**

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# **Leadership Theories, Frameworks, and Approaches in Practice**

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Leadership experts who author this book skillfully present various leadership theories, their historical roots, and present applications in a concise, compelling, and user-friendly format. Written for all students of leadership, regardless of years in the field, editors Guthrie and Whitney deliver a distinctive format to make sense of the complexity of leadership and how to apply theories to enhance leadership practice.

—*Dr. Cynthia Cherrey, President,*  
**International Leadership Association**

This exploration of theories, by outstanding contemporary leadership scholars, is exactly what we need to sharpen the study of leadership and improve the practice of leadership. Theory, and critically its context, is foundational to leadership learning and development. The full range of theories presented with clarity in this book makes this an essential and welcome resource for new students and experienced scholars.

—*Dr. Mary Hale Toler, Dean,*  
**Staley School of Leadership, Kansas State University**

Leadership in any organization nowadays, is characterized by constant change and increasing complexity. Moreover, significant external drivers like the recent global pandemic have fundamentally influenced and are reshaping our theorizing on and practice of leadership. This book edited by Kathy L. Guthrie and Rich Whitney, comes at an opportune moment as scholars, practitioners and leaders in general grapple with their own understanding and lived realities in leadership, it is highly recommended!

—*Dr Oliver Seale, African Leadership University, Rwanda*

Theory is important for advancing leadership science and practice. This volume offers accessible perspectives on a variety of foundational and cutting-edge leadership theories that should help students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the role of theory in leadership.

—*Dr. David V. Day, Professor of Psychological Science,*  
**Academic Director of the Kravis Leadership Institute**

# **Contemporary Perspectives on Leadership Learning**

Series Editor  
Kathy L. Guthrie  
Florida State University, USA

This series is dedicated to contemporary perspectives on leadership learning, which includes leadership teaching, education, development, and scholarship. It is intended to appeal to academic researchers, leadership scholars, leadership educators, and university instructors looking for thought-provoking reference material for classroom use. The purpose of the series is to highlight foundational knowledge and emerging innovations in scholarship on curriculum, pedagogy, and methodology of teaching and learning in leadership. Each book showcases a different topic critical to the research and practice of leadership teaching and learning. With this approach, the mission of the series is to examine the complexities of leadership learning from a variety of perspectives to give the audience access to breadth and depth of scholarship in this area, as well as provide contemporary reference material and textbooks for leadership learning in the classroom.

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Thinking to Transform Companion Manual  
Changing the Narrative  
The Role of Leadership Educators

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Supplementary material: Instructor’s Resources including quiz questions (with answers), PowerPoint slides that instructors can use for lectures, and bullet points with teaching tips on specific theories are available for course instructors only who purchase the book. Course instructors can email [booksales@emerald.com](mailto:booksales@emerald.com) with proof of purchase to receive the materials.

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This book would not have been possible without the amazing contributions of leadership scholars, theorists, and practitioners. It is through their brilliance and thoughtfulness we can continue to have discourse and advancement the field of leadership. To those people who fill our picture frames, in the past, present, and future, thank you for not only inspiring us as a collective, but for allowing this field of leadership studies to develop in beautiful ways. Here is to looking forward and what theories can assist us in the future.

Kathy L. Guthrie and Rich Whitney  
February 2025

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# **INTRODUCTION**

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## CHAPTER 1

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# FRAMING LEADERSHIP FOR PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT

Leadership is one of the least understood concepts, although it is one of the most discussed topics. This chapter presents leadership as a process that requires leaders and followers in a specific context. It also discusses how leadership is socially constructed and transdisciplinary in nature. This first chapter introduces how the book is set up to focus on how leadership is learned and used through theories, models, and concepts. It discusses how 22 chapters of this book is dedicated to introducing various leadership theories and models. These theory focused chapters situate the theories and concepts back with the scholars who created them.

*Keywords:* Leadership definitions; process; social constructs; transdisciplinary; snapshot; theory

Leadership is one of the most discussed, but least understood concepts (Burns, 1978). If you don't believe us, do a quick Google search. When you type in "definition of leadership" about 1.8 billion results come up.

1.8 billion. If that does not scream multiple understandings of this one concept, then we are unsure what does. To add to the confusion of the word leadership, it is often mistakenly used interchangeably with the word leader, which adds to the uncertainty of what these concepts really mean (Dugan & Komives, 2011). Although we will introduce what leadership is in this chapter, this book is about how leadership is learned and used through theories, models, and concepts. In fact, 22 chapters of this book are dedicated to introducing various leadership theories and models. These theory-focused chapters situate the theories and concepts back with the scholars who created them. More on that later.

Theories and models are important tools to discuss the concept of leadership and the various facets that make up the complex and nuanced situations in which leadership emerges. Chapter 2 will discuss in detail what theories, models, and concepts are and how to use them. However, it is important to embrace theories and see their value in applying concepts to everyday life. One way to think about how to use leadership theories is like a puzzle. When you start working on a physical puzzle, what are the first pieces of the puzzle you look for? For us, we look for the flat edge puzzle pieces, often the corners first. When looking at the picture the puzzle is on the box, we work to place those flat edge pieces to create a frame. This is how most people start a puzzle. That puzzle frame can be looked at as a theory or model. The frame gives you a place to start making sense of the complex picture of the puzzle. The picture the puzzle creates is like the situation in which leadership is being engaged in.

Another way to visualize theory is that of a picture frame, just like on the front cover. A frame can help contextualize the illustration inside of it. In both of these examples, the frame is a tool to help you make sense, which is what theories can do for situations. Before we get into the specifics of leadership theories, we want to provide some information on what leadership is.

## WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

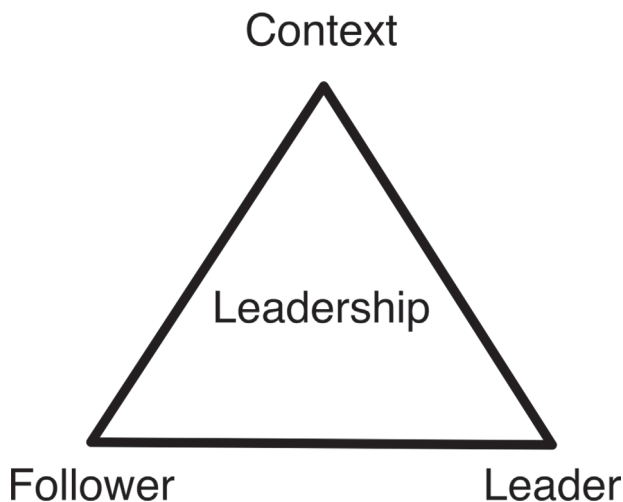
Defining what leadership is has been at the forefront of scholarship and discussions for decades. Rost (1991) analyzed hundreds of definitions and explored the evolution of the term and proposed criteria that a definition of leadership needed to be “clear, concise, understandable by scholars and practitioners, researchable, practically relevant, and persuasive” (p. 99). Kellerman (2012) noted that by reviewing leadership literature there were at least 40 models of leadership and over 1,500 definitions. It makes sense that Dugan and Komives (2011) said there is more debate than agreement over what the definition of leadership is. To get us all on the same page, we want to explore three aspects of how we frame leadership—that is it a process, it is socially constructed, and it is transdisciplinary in nature. By

establishing these aspects of leadership, we hope to frame it in a way that the theories, models, and concepts in this book are more accessible, understandable, and applicable.

## Leadership Is a Process

As mentioned before, leader and leadership are often mistakenly used interchangeably. Although they are related, they are different in that leadership is a process and a leader is a person who engages in the leadership process. Guthrie and Devies (2024) shared a simple, but effective visual of a triangle to represent the leadership process (Figure 1.1). The three points in the triangle includes context, leader, and follower which together make up the process of leadership. Essentially, the process of leadership occurs when a leader and follower interact in a certain context.

The three points of the triangle that represents the process of leadership includes context, leader, and follower. All these elements are essential for the leadership process to occur. The leader is a person, and the follower can either be an individual or multiple people. Most often leadership theories revolve around the people involved, the leaders and followers. However, context is a critical component of leadership that cannot be ignored. Tuning into context helps uncover how leaders and followers interact in the process of leadership and allow for theories to come alive and be useful application tools.



**Figure 1.1** Leadership triangle. *Source:* Reprinted with permission from Devies and Guthrie Copyright 2023.

Context is a complex, nuanced situation in which leadership occurs (Guthrie & Devies, 2024). Context can evolve rapidly, and it is important to understand that context is not one single event, but a multidimensional integration of layers. Various dimensions of context enlighten the complexity of context and how it informs the leadership process. Various dimensions of context include cultural (Vygotsky, 1978), historical (Vygotsky, 1978), ideological (Foucault, 1972), personal (Erikson, 1950), and social (Blumer, 1969), together provides a fuller picture that allows for deeper understanding of the situation in which leadership is occurring. In addition to leadership being a process in which leaders and followers interact in a specific context, exploring that leadership is socially constructed and transdisciplinary in nature helps to situate the complex concept of leadership to be better used and theories to be applied.

## **Leadership Is Socially Constructed**

As discussed, the concept of leadership has countless definitions. These definitions are based on the lived experiences, social identities, and world-views individuals experience and hold. This makes leadership socially constructed because individuals' definitions differ because of their varying experiences that create the meaning of this concept (Dugan, 2017; Guthrie et al., 2021). A concept needs cultural influence to develop and convey meaning (Crotty, 1998), which what it means to be a leader and what leadership is needs cultural context to make meaning. This is critical to note when defining leadership. Acknowledging the complexity of how leadership is defined is critical when learning theoretical frameworks and how to apply them, as this book focuses on.

## **Leadership Is Transdisciplinary in Nature**

Leadership has been discussed as being interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary (Harvey & Riggio, 2011; Sowcik & Komives, 2020) for decades. However, leadership as a transdisciplinary topic is relatively new (Francovich, 2020; Gleason et al., 2021). Transdisciplinary approaches suggest integration between and across all academic disciplines (Piaget, 1972). Leavy (2016) stated, "Transdisciplinarity aims to provide a holistic and synergistic approach to studying an issue or a problem. Further the key principles of transdisciplinarity also include transcendence, emergence, synthesis, integration, innovation and flexibility" (p. 29). Framing leadership in this way brings forward the need for integration of ideas to elevate learning and be able to apply to the wicked problems our world is facing. Although there

can be barriers to this integrated approach, such as perceived disciplinary boundaries (Gleason et al., 2021), the study and practice of leadership can be a catalyst for collaboration for developing future leaders.

## WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK AND HOW TO USE IS

This book is about theories, a collection of diverse scholars and theoretical experts have not only written about various leadership theories, but have traced the historical roots, evolution, and current use of each theory discussed. This book expanded from a modest book of theories to learning about complex theories and how they are applied. There are several ways to use this book, from simply looking up well known theories to digging deeper into how these theories frame complex pictures of leadership in diverse contexts that are complex and nuanced. We will share the theory sections in this book, a snapshot of the theories and the scholars who shared them, and how each theory chapter flows.

### Theoretical Sections

The theories explored in this book are shared in six sections. The first section focuses on the *foundational* leadership theories that are still used, although some are perceived as being outdated, it is important to learn about these foundational theories to better understand where the field of leadership has come from. Knowing foundational theories support the ability to apply more contemporary theories, which this book primarily concentrates on. The second grouping of theories are grounded in *behavioral* aspects. These theories focus on the leaders' actions when engaging in leadership. The third section is focused on *transformational* theories, starting off with transformational theory itself. Several theories in this book are framed in postindustrial (Rost, 1991) perspectives, which include relational and transformative aspects. These theories have been essential in leadership studies and learning in recent history.

The focus of the fourth section is *systems*. Theories in this grouping extends beyond self as leader and an organization. It explores aspects of process and context in leadership, and dives into systemic methods and how various aspects of the process of leadership can influence the heart of structures. *Cultural agency* is the next theoretical section. The values, ideas, norms that are shared among various groups of people forms different cultural perspectives which are important for diverse ways in engaging in the leadership process. Finally, *self as leader* is the final grouping of theories. As you can see from the title, it focuses on the leader and how self-leadership,

as well as how leader's emotional intelligence and identity are important in further understanding leadership as a process.

## Snapshot of Theories

Intentionally, this book was designed to provide brief overviews of several theories in a digestible, relevant, and informative way. These short synopses, hopefully, give you an idea of several leadership theories, why they are important to the study of leadership, and how they apply to leadership learning. The theoretical sections offered above demonstrate an overview of the organization of the theories in this book.

Beginning with the foundational section, Chapter 3 provides critical information for trait and style theories that set the groundwork for leadership theory (Devies, 2025). Skills and competencies are explored in Chapter 4 (Headrick & Niewoehner-Green, 2025), which adds to the underpinnings of many contemporary leadership theories through capacity building. Gigliotti (2025) shares the closely related leadership theories of situational and contingency, which are often easily applied in Chapter 5. The last chapter in the first section of foundational leadership theories, Chapter 6, Chunoo (2025) provides an overview of path-goal theory and leader-member exchange theory. These two leadership theories found their roots in management and are important for the evolution of the leadership field, as we know it today.

The second section of leadership theories focuses on behavioral aspects of leadership. In Chapter 7, Eva et al. (2025) focuses on servant leadership, which centers the well-being of people in the process of leadership. Authentic leadership is discussed in Chapter 8, which centers leaders who are true to themselves while aligning their beliefs and behaviors with the organizations they are working within (Dannhäuser, 2025). One of the most widely used concepts on college campuses is explored in Chapter 9. The five exemplary practices of leadership, also known as the leadership challenge, provides perspectives on how leaders can act in influential ways in the leadership process (Guthrie, 2025). The final theory discussed in the behavioral theoretical section is connective leadership (Ott & Cartwright, 2025). This leadership theory amplifies the importance of how connections between everyone and how leaders' actions are essential in linking and navigating these connections appropriately.

Transformational theories are explored in the third theoretical section. In Chapter 11, Pitichat and Riggio (2025) discuss the transformational leadership theory and how its four attributes can inspire followers to work together and develop their own leadership capacity in the process. The social change model of leadership development is explored in Chapter 12 (Pierre & Rocco, 2025), which is another widely used theory for college