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Once learned, never forgotten: effective leadership development with social construction as a threshold concept

Jon Billsberry

For centuries, leadership development has focused on learning from leaders. What traits did they possess? What skills did they use? What challenges did they overcome? How did they change their behavior? What made them charismatic? How did they capture people’s imaginations? How did they manipulate their followers? But, for centuries, those wishing to become leaders or hoping to improve their leadership skills have been frustrated that the leadership insights picked up from their analysis of leaders did not translate into positive change. They remained onlookers desperately seeking a definition of leadership and practical guidance for their own leadership development.

Since the start of the twenty-first century, ideas swirling around social construction have been increasingly integrated into how we think about leadership. Initially, scholars viewed social construction as a critical adjunct to mainstream leadership (Grint and Jackson, 2010), but, as I shall argue, it appears the approach might be more fundamental to leadership than previously thought. In fact, based on my own experiences teaching leadership as a social construction, I have come to the conclusion that the social construction approach to leadership may offer some fundamental insights into the construct of leadership.

Unlearning leadership

Over the years, I have taught many theories of leadership, leadership issues and controversies, and been engaged in practical leadership development. I shared the frustration of many leadership instructors as none of my teaching had the effect of creating leaders. I might have improved a few communication and persuasion skills and produced some interesting insights but not the wholesale change that my students were looking for. As a result, a few years ago, I changed my theoretical perspective. Instead of thinking of leadership as a quality of leaders, I adopted the social construction approach, also known as attribution theory (Meindl et al., 1985) and began thinking of leadership as a quality of observers, or, as the saying has it, as being in the eye of the beholder.

Teaching leadership from this perspective involves a lot of unlearning, both within the instructor and the students. We have become so accustomed to thinking of leadership as a quality of leaders that it is extraordinarily difficult to think of it as anything else. Unlike abstract words used to convey our sense of love, beauty, hatred, admiration, and disgust, the word “leadership” contains a specific object, the “leader”. So, while we readily accept that love, beauty, etc. are a quality of the beholder, the word “leadership” tricks us into thinking this emotional response is a quality of leaders. As a result, a lot of unlearning has to take place to prepare students for the concept of leadership not being a quality of leaders.
My approach is to present students with images of well-known leaders and explore who thinks these people are leaders and the reasons why. After an hour or so of discussion, it becomes apparent that there is no person whom everyone agrees is a leader. Moreover, when people do agree on who is a leader and who is not, they offer different reasons justifying their opinions. Interestingly, when these reasons are discussed, students realize that, when they talk about the leadership qualities of others, they are actually talking about themselves; they are talking about the things they think are leadership. In essence, we find out more about them than the people they are talking about. I also demonstrate there is no agreement on which leadership theory is paramount. Together, these approaches prime students for the idea that leadership might not be a quality of leaders, but of observers.

Threshold concepts

A threshold concept is quite a new idea in educational technology. It denotes an idea that is fundamental to the subject, which once appreciated opens up new ideas, and once understood, can never be unlearned. Examples would be transaction costs in economics, or gravity in physics. The idea is that mastery of such concepts signals the end of rudimentary learning in a subject and opens up a new set of advanced ideas. Threshold concepts are the difficult ideas that, once conquered, mark the transition from basic to advanced learning (Meyer and Land, 2005).

Threshold concepts have been elusive in management and leadership (Wright and Gilmore, 2011). They require an accepted body of knowledge and an agreed approach to a subject. In management and leadership, we simply do not have such certainty or agreement. So, I was somewhat surprised to find that the social construction approach to leadership acted and behaved like a threshold concept in my classroom.

I taught this approach, first, by explaining it to students. I followed this up with a series of activities that all conceived of leadership being in the eyes of beholders. These included a 360-degree leadership assessment in which other people were asked to give their perceptions of the students as leaders. Another activity was an analysis of people talking about leaders. They were asked what they learned about the leader and what they learned about the person speaking. Students were also asked to make films in which they had to portray one of their characters in such a way that the audience would perceive him or her as a leader.

Social construction as a threshold concept

Once students grasped social construction as a new approach to leadership, it looked and behaved as a threshold concept; it opened up a new appreciation of leadership. Students no longer wanted to learn the theories in the textbooks, instead they wanted to understand the leadership theories inside their own heads – their implicit or lay theories of leadership. These theories explain how they perceive leaders and how they behave when they want to be viewed as leaders. They wanted to know how their own brains were biasing their actions. To help the students surface and unravel their implicit theories, I used another suite of activities (e.g. word association, projective exercises, rich pictures, and cognitive mapping) that encouraged them to look inwardly (Schyns et al., 2011). From a rudimentary understanding of their own implicit leadership theories, the “penny dropped”. To be seen as a leader by someone, there is no point doing what you think is leadership. Instead, you must be seen to do the things that accord with the observer’s implicit theory of leadership. For my students, this was the big aha moment; the moment when they finally “got” leadership.

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I then encouraged students to revisit the “traditional” theories through the social construction lens. When looking at trait theory studies afresh, students found these informed them of people’s perceptions toward leaders. Authentic leadership became a contemporary reaction that captured people’s alienation from big business, politicians, and political correctness. Charismatic leadership was turned on its head and the students explored what they would find charismatic. All these theories made sense to them now they had the right lens.

I would see my students on later units. Without fail, they had not only retained the idea that leadership is an observer-centric social construction but also internalized it. They said the idea made sense to them, that it had helped them understand people better and improved their effectiveness as leaders in the workplace. They said when they hear people talking about leaders and leadership, they now hear people talking about themselves. This helped them understand those people’s implicit leadership theories and shape their own behaviors to them.

**Conclusion**
This is a practical and effective way to teach leadership that brings leadership alive for students and makes it relevant to their work. It requires the instructor to abandon their past notions of leadership being a quality of leaders and focus instead on individual’s own behavior when they want to be seen as a leader. This puts leadership in a psychological realm in which sensation, perception, and attribution are the key factors. Rather than being grounded in an analysis of “the good and the great”, it is grounded in an analysis of every person.

**References**


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