



A prospective PHD candidate's perspective on navigating and understanding current leadership discourse

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Introduction

My journey with the Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute began last year as a master's student in the field of responsible leadership and in that time, I realised that I would like to pursue doctoral studies in the Institute. The following article is a personal account of how I navigated the current leadership discourse, made sense of it, and identified themes in line with the core workstreams of the institute. At the very end of this piece, I have tied the current themes back to my personal interests and my "why", since, at this level of study, the motivation behind the intent to study is an important consideration.

Current themes in leadership discourse

The Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute has made twenty resources available to aspiring PhD candidates. These resources are in the form of literature and contain research by some of the foremost voices in the field of leadership. While reading the articles made available by the Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute (ALLI), I began to notice several themes. I grouped these identified themes into higher order themes using an Excel

Database. From there, I attempted to identify links between the leadership discourse themes, and other themes identified in the article which fall within the ALLI's areas of interest. The current themes identified in the literature are listed below:

1) The first group of themes I identified were centred around the leader and followers themselves. I classified these into that of "followership", "formal leadership", "individual characteristics", "trust", and "leadership behaviours". Individual characteristics and the behaviours of "good" leaders might harken back to the days of the "Great Man" theory amongst others but are still relevant in today's leadership discourse. Friedrich, Griffith and Mumford (2016) urge that the role of the formal leader is not ignored, despite the emergence of collective leadership. By focussing on the characteristics of formal leaders, emergent leaders can come to the fore and it is this blend of both formal and emergent leadership, both hierarchical and collective, that may better contribute to team effectiveness. The research further points to characteristics and behaviours of leaders (both emergent and formal), which may contribute to or hinder team effectiveness. Some of these characteristics which contribute to effective leadership appear to be inherent to a person and include intelligence, emotional stability, and openness to new experience. Behaviours on the other

hand are not necessarily inherent, and those of an effective leader include good communication, compassion, sustained engagement and open-mindedness (Maak, Pless & Wohlgezogen, 2021; Sánchez, Ospina & Salgado, 2020; Zia-ur-Rehman, Ishaque & Zafar, 2021).

This combination of characteristics and behaviours seem to be crucial in determining the effectiveness of leadership, and conversely what would constitute an ineffective leader or a narcissistic, who, through “exceptionalism” have had their characters eroded and corrupted. These behaviours and characteristics of leaders would mean very little without discussing the concept of followership. One of the current themes identified in the articles was the importance of followership. Followers are seen as crucial to an organisation’s success, so much so, that some schools of leadership development focus on the development of followers and not just leaders. The importance of followership characteristics as being crucial to the success of leadership is starting to emerge. Followers who are courageous enough to serve their organisation, do what is right and participate in transformation. The focus is now shifting from followers being passively directed by leaders to rather being partners with their leaders and using that partnership of leader-follower to drive a team toward effectiveness. While passive followers will always exist in organisations, and they will be more prevalent in organisations where leadership leans more toward autocratic management, or they fear repercussions of speaking up or being proactive, we must closely examine what role active and proactive followers play in contributing to effective leadership. By investigating the influence of followers on leadership, we may have to also identify typologies for upward leadership, and how the combination of both up-and-down leadership contribute toward creating change toward a common purpose (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera & McGregor, 2010; Zia-ur-Rehman et al., 2021).

2) The second family of themes that I identified is centred around types of leadership. In the past, much emphasis was placed on western leadership theories, as scholars of today it is important that we begin to look inward toward what effective African leadership looks like. This involves investigating how leadership theory can be developed, progressed, and tailored for African nations, but also how African leadership theory can contribute to the repository of leadership knowledge available for global scholars (Metz, 2018). The concept of Afro-communal leadership is a theme that has come to the fore in recent leadership discourse. This type of leadership favours “we” over “I”, and pride in the collective achievements. When applied in a business context, this means that a business will strive to help those it believes is in need or has promised to help, but also those with which the business believes they have a shared way of life.

The Afro-Communal (AC) leadership in a business context means that the business identifies with the society in which it operates in some way, and thus has moral obligation to display solidarity with it. Going beyond this, what is important to note is that the AC leadership style does not seem to favour punishment or fear in terms of dealing with an employee or member who is failing to meet expectations (Friedrich et al., 2016; Metz, 2018). In examining recent research, some of the tenets of AC speak to those of other leadership theories and styles. Some of these include collective leadership, social identity theory, relational leadership, and servant leadership. Collective leadership processes have been studied more often in the past decade, with the premise that multiple people take formal and informal leadership roles over time. This does not take away the role of a formal leader (and this is true for AC leadership in some instances), but rather the formal leader facilitates the emergence of other leaders either with certain individuals or within the team. Relational leadership also speaks to some of the ideals of AC leadership, in that the focus is on the community and not the self, and there is a potential shift of focus from the ethics of leadership from a project on oneself to a project in relation to and for others. In the theory of servant leadership, a good leader prioritises others’ needs and enables others to commune. A small mention should also be made of the concept of contemplative leadership, which is founded on the principle of the ethical care of others, and societal benefits are given the same importance as economic ones. Rather than consider leaders as virtuous, ethical leadership should be seen as an activity that is both complex and virtuous. Although not entirely synonymous, and often with striking differences, AC leadership shares some similarities with other Western leadership styles and these differences and similarities, and their contexts, provide a potential avenue for future research (Grandy & Sliwa, 2017; Hogg, van Knippenberg & Rast III, 2012; Metz, 2018; Steffens, Munt, van Knippenberg, Platow & Haslam, 2021).

3) Another striking group of themes that emerge from the literature is that of establishing weaknesses in certain leadership theories. The first of these is charismatic leadership wherein the leader tends to polarise people into ardent supporters or bitter opponents. At first glance, a very easy example of this type of leader would be former president of the United States, Donald Trump, but some are less obvious, such as business mogul Steve Jobs. There is also very little research on follower characteristics and how they influence a charismatic leader and processes, what essentially constitutes a charismatic leader, and how charisma might be lost. Transactional leadership is another type of leadership that came under the spotlight, in that it consists of a collection of often ineffective leadership behaviours, which seem to lack a common denominator. Transformational leadership, which is sometimes seen as the antithesis of transactional. The weaknesses in this type of leadership are in the assumptions which lie in the “heroic leader”



stereotype, rather than describing leadership as a collective process of enhancing the capacity of people and teams to achieve work goals.

The impact of leaders on group processes, as well as the influence of organisational processes has, to date, not been very well addressed in the transformational leadership theory data (Yukl, 1999). While these three theories have certainly been an evolution from older theories, it is important that we continue to expand on what we know, but more importantly, what we do not know. The fact that existing theories are being examined for weaknesses means that our understanding of leadership is shifting. This means that by applying critical lenses to theories we can find similar blind spots, similar best practices, and similar contexts in which these theories can be adapted. Given the pandemic, shifts in business processes have happened quicker than they would have ordinarily. It is only logical that changes, shifts, and further evolutions are demanded of leadership theories to meet the demands of a world we did not anticipate being in. Leadership discourse has a significant focus and interest in looking at what we have, taking what works, and doing it better.

Linkages between leadership discourse and other themes closely tied to the ALLI's core workstreams

The second element I examined in the review of the literature, was to identify linkages between the current leadership discourse and other themes tied to the core workstreams of the ALLI.

1) The first additional theme I encountered was that of Marxism in relation to accounting practice and economic inequality. Marxism posits that the struggle between the social classes, in this case the capitalist employers and the workers, defines economic relations in a capitalist economy. An interesting link found in reading this line of enquiry was that between leadership behaviours, accounting practice, and the role the accounting profession has played in hiding or failing to highlight the scale and urgency of growing inequity. Marxist principles in addressing such challenges would be aligned with enabling stakeholders (in particular workers) to resist the power of capital embedded in accounting practice, logic, and praxis (Tweedie & Hazelton, 2019).

One of the strategic workstreams of the ALLI is "Leadership in Accountability", with focus on the role of leadership in shaping alternative accounting principles in support of social and environmental justice. Given this focus, Marxism in relation to accounting practice seems to be related to the field of leadership studies since inequality remains one of our wicked problems in leadership research. That being, a problem which is

inherently difficult to solve. The concept of stakeholder engagement is also not one which is new to leadership discourse, but has a major role to play in developing accounting principles which better support social justice and help in finding solutions to these wicked problems. According to (Burns & Jollands, 2020), accounting should act in the public interest and aid those who are most vulnerable. In the past, we have seen instances where accounting principles and praxes have been used to protect the interests of corporations at the expense of public interest. This does not have to be the case.

The accounting profession has the capability of holding to account those who have the resources and ability to alleviate societal hardships and inequality. Dellaportas and Davenport (2008) further elaborate on the definition of Public Interest (PI) in accounting practice. In this context PI is defined as the collective wellbeing of the community that the profession serves. This definition creates a moral imperative for members of the profession to do what is best for the society they serve, and not just themselves or their clients (Hopwood, 1983). In reality, the definition of public interest actually remains vague and different for members of the profession and for members of the public. Leaders in government and business, thus have an obligation to define the public interest and to educate its citizenry on its meaning. As representatives and spokesperson for accountants, professional accounting bodies are empowered with a similar responsibility to act on behalf of a public and to do whatever is necessary to protect and advance the interests of the public.

A definition of the public interest establishes a standard for members of the profession to strive and achieve as well as create an aim to benefit others. Such a standard should be highly visible and so ingrained in the mind-set of accountants that it becomes the benchmark upon which all activities are undertaken and measured. By upholding such principles, members of the profession ensure the happiness and collective welfare of the public and thus protect the economic well-being of the community (Guthrie & Parker, 2017). The above themes speak in similar tones to some of the themes in leadership discourse discussed earlier. Many of these themes, although not labelled as such, speak to the principles of relational, contemplative, and servant leadership, and indeed, some elements of Afro-Communal leadership too. These leadership styles and theories speak to leading beyond the self, and beyond leadership as an individual project, but rather as a process acted out in relation to a community. The ethics of leadership (which is relevant to accounting, public interest, and social justice) is something that requires a shift of organisational purpose so that societal benefits are given the same importance as organisational ones, and that this process of leadership is seen as the ethical care of the other. In this way, it can be seen that the transformation of accounting principles and praxis is actually closely tied to the themes identified in leadership discourse, and that these leadership themes



can be applied to accounting research to help address wicked societal problems.

2) In reading the recent research, an element that is discussed in significant depth is that of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) The ALLI has already identified the SDGs and leadership in development as part of its core workstreams with the South African SDG Hub being hosted by the ALLI. The SDGs are not a miracle catch-all which will suddenly end all inequality and solve all wicked problems to create some utopia. However, implementing them by means of certain “transformations” will see substantial progress being made toward no one being left behind. Each SDG should be linked to a transformation in societal structure, and these transformations assist in the attainment of multiple SDGs.

These transformations are on massive scale, globally, nationally, and regionally. They involve adaptation per region for them to be feasible. Because these transformations are so “large” and require financing and cooperation from both the private and public sectors, leadership is vital in driving them (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Mazzucato, Messner, Nakicenovic & Rockström, 2019). The underpinnings, design and implementation of such radical transformations and such significant societal shifts, require responsible leadership. International cooperation will be needed more than ever for partnerships, peace, and financing. This will require “good” leadership to be driven. Making sense of leadership theory and discourse, will help us, as scholars better make sense of what RL is (and what it is not) both in the global and African contexts, and what it means for different disciplines and nations. In this way, we can harness the principles of RL to find the best way for us, as a continent to tackle the SDGs and the transformations and societal changes needed to bring them to fruition.

3) The third element that should be addressed is that of stakeholder partnerships. The last core workstream of the ALLI is that of leadership in context, and where much of my master’s study was founded. This workstream focusses on the expansion of responsible leadership theory but also leadership in collaboration. Stakeholder partnerships emerged as a theme in the articles provided. Achieving the SDGs requires multi-disciplinary stakeholder engagement. The ALLI and Future Africa Research faculty realise that wicked or grand problems facing society are inherently complex and multifaceted in nature. These problems not only require engaging with all relevant stakeholders, including those who are most disenfranchised, but also, importantly transdisciplinary research (Dentoni, Bitzer & Schouten, 2018; Haywood, Funke, Audouin, Musvoto & Nahman, 2019). These partnerships between disciplines, regions, and other stakeholders are crucial in better realising the SDGs. what remains a challenge is coordinating the efforts of the various stakeholders

when not everyone agrees on the importance of each challenge.

Transdisciplinary research and collaboration, as seen with the ALLI and Future Africa Campus, will help create broader knowledge and stimulate deeper understanding of wicked problems. These cross-bonds will also help build trust between various disciplines and stakeholders. The University of Pretoria is well-positioned in terms of its leadership studies and a vast array of other disciplines such as medicine, engineering, science, technology, and humanities. This helps bring together scholars both from SA and the rest of the world together to help tackle these wicked problems to build a more sustainable and equitable future (Dionne, Gupta, Sotak, Shirreffs, Serban, Hao, Kim & Yammarino, 2014; Mirvis & Googins, 2018). The more so since as an innovator, the charismatic leader tends to break with established ways of thinking and acting, and thus to take positions which diverge from his followers’ expectations and consequently raise disturbing questions in their minds.

Charismatic authority is not exerted by way of the demand for absolute and unconditional obedience, but operates through powerful persuasion. According to the Greeks, persuasion operates along three lines: *ethos* is about establishing your authority to speak on the subject in question; *logos* is the logical argument you present to support your point; and *pathos* is your attempt to sway an audience emotionally. Charismatic authority would then be recognised to be legitimate by the followers and persuasive on the level of reason, which evokes affective commitment from the followers.

Gaps in the literature and areas of future research

In order for me to identify gaps in the literature and areas of future research, I re-read the articles provided and thought about what I would have wanted to read about in leadership discourse. I then also read the call for conference papers for the Responsible Leadership Conference being held in Stellenbosch this year, as well as the focus areas of the Future Africa Campus. This helped me formulate potential areas of research in which the ALLI could place its focus.

1) One of the first gaps and areas of future research I identified in the literature is what role accounting can play in addressing inequality in greater depth and how accounting research can assist in changing inequitable economic systems-what is good for business is not always good for society.

2) Another area of future research is that of understanding what Responsible Leadership (RL) is and being able to model it at various levels of analysis.



What does RL look like across disciplines, regions and countries? How has the pandemic changed the way we think about RL and how will our discourse be shaped going forward? Can we find examples of best practices to learn from, particularly considering the pandemic? Can we then conduct work across disciplines to create an understanding of RL and what “good” looks like? How can we use African principles of leadership for an enhanced worldview?

3) How can we leverage RL to help achieve the SDGs? And from here, how do we leverage and develop responsible followership to aid this? How do RLs engage in transdisciplinary partnerships to maximise shared knowledge and resources?

4) How do RLs in organisations create Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies? What is the decision-making process for sustainability strategies with shared benefits for business AND society, if any? And more importantly, how can we ingrain RL into the corporate culture, from the support staff to the executives?

5) What does the world of machine learning, artificial intelligence, and data science mean for RL and how can we use these technologies to advance RL? If we want to quantify what makes a responsible leader, we can utilise transcripts of speeches, newspaper articles recordings and videos of world and business leaders. We could then group similar articles, topics and words together, and then associate the different leaders with the content. In this way we can begin to associate themes and groups of words with certain leaders. We could also code articles and other media created by other people about those leaders in question. We can go further and analyse sentiment in these transcripts to formulate a metric against which responsible leadership is measured. From here we can combine this with other metrics such as personality tests which already exist to come to a working definition of responsible leadership which is supported by robust science.

Personal research interests, and my desire to pursue a PhD in Leadership

Given my master's in the field of RL, I realise I have a desire to continue studying in this field. I have realised that I have a strong interest in the rights of women and girls given my research in this area, and my personal experiences as a domestic abuse survivor. In addition to this, I have a strong interest in healthcare and science since I am a healthcare professional too (specifically an ICU dietitian well-versed in the devastating impact of hunger and poverty). My aspirations to work and advance the field of leadership in these fields not only speak to certain SDGs such as numbers 2, 3 and 5, but also to the overall vision of what the SDGs aim to

achieve, and that is that the inequality gap is narrowed, and that no person is left behind.

What does this mean and why does it matter? What this means is that there is a better future for everyone in the world with less suffering. Inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, and leads to increased crime, disease, and environmental degradation. In short, we should care. Not just as scholars, but also as governments, business leaders and human beings. Inequality harms all of us to some degree, and reducing this gap is beneficial to everyone, not just those most disenfranchised.

Thus, as scholars, we must reimagine the way we do things. As leadership scholars our mandate involves engaging across disciplines and being creative about how we research. It is only through transdisciplinary innovative, novel, and creative thinking, that we will be able to solve problems and create a future that is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable and is aligned with the SDGs, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the National Development Plan 2030. While I had always thought leadership studies to be limited to those scholars with undergrads and experience in economic and management science, my time at the leadership institute (and engaging with the literature) has made me realise the importance of transdisciplinary research and collaboration to reimagine the way we see leadership and the way we engage with society.

Having gone through the selection process, and also engaging with other scholars, I understand that a PhD is the integration of theory, methodology and the scientific application of that methodology on my identified problem. My readings in preparing me for PhD candidacy selection has shown me how various themes in leadership are tied into the ALLI's workstreams, with distinctly African themes for an African university. Exploring these articles from the foremost voices in leadership discourse has opened my eyes to what we have, where we need to focus, and where our gaps lie. While a huge step up from my master's, I am certainly up for the challenge and look forward to contributing meaningfully to the field and helping to fill some of these identified gaps.

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