



## The Problem with Leadership Theory

By Brett Thomas and Russ Volckmann

*[ This article is an excerpt from Brett Thomas' and Russ Volckmann's forthcoming book on integral leadership being published late 2011 by Integral Publishers. ]*

To understand integral leadership, one must have at minimum a working knowledge of conventional leadership. Therefore, the first of the frameworks that integral leadership is based upon is, not surprisingly, the notion of leadership itself.

We have each been fascinated by the phenomenon known as “leadership” for decades. Why do some people have more influence than others? Why do people gravitate to certain people, and styles, and not others? How is it that visionary leaders are so uniquely capable of convincing people to take action? How do leaders inspire people to achieve great feats? And on the darker side, how is it that so many leaders in history, and today, are able to persuade people to act against their own self-interest?

First, let's consider leadership as a popular topic. How often do you overhear people talking about the practice of leadership? If you are like most readers, the main discussions revolve around *leaders* who are ineffective in their roles...not about *leadership*. You might hear (or participate in) conversations about your community leaders, your organization's leaders, or national leaders. In most organizations (and communities), the conversations are typically framed in terms of the ways that leaders are failing.

Reflect on how often the topic of leadership arises in your circumstances. Setting aside the discussions involving criticism of other leaders, how often is the practice of leadership discussed? Is this topic a popular one?

It seems to me that many, if not most, people would like to know how to motivate and have more influence with others. Most people would like to be more effective in their interpersonal relationships at work and at home. Most people are committed to improving their lives, organizations, and/or communities in one way or another. Yet how often do you overhear people talking about leadership? How many leadership books do people read? How many leadership courses do typical managers and—yes—leaders attend? If you are like most people, the answers to all of the above questions are “not often” and “not many.” Puzzling, isn't it?

Why aren't more people interested in learning about and practicing this thing called "leadership" which seems so fundamental, so essential? Why is it that, the main demographic for leadership books and leader training programs has historically been rich, gray haired, white conservative males? Why don't more people study the practice of leadership? Why don't more people buy books on this subject? Why don't all of us know more "leadership academy graduates" and "leadership aces?"

Our conclusion to these questions is a provocative one.

**The reason for leadership's lack of popularity is the sobering fact that in many cases it flat doesn't work.**

For students and teachers of leadership theory, this may sound heretical. Of course we believe that leadership theory has its merits. However, we are challenging you to take a clear-eyed look at leadership (as a practice and as the study of that practice) and take stock of how well conventional leadership (theory, practice, education) actually works.

If leadership (as it is conventionally understood, taught, and practiced) was a *consumer product*, it would be a lackluster one at best. Seriously.

Think about it. How many raving fans of this thing called "leadership" do you know? How many people do you know that have even read a book on leadership or attended a 5-day leadership seminar? Did *the product* work well? Did it make them better leaders? Did the people in their lives experience them as fundamentally more trustworthy, more aware, more inspiring, more potent? With rare exceptions, the answer to that question is "no."

Leadership as it is conventionally taught and practiced does not work well. Rather than being a practical, mainstream "product" that the average man or woman happily purchases and uses, the idea of leadership—especially leadership training programs—has been viewed as more of a luxury item targeted at an intellectually and economically elite segment of society: typically CEOs and executives who work in corporations that can afford to invest in an expensive product with a track record of extremely inconsistent (usually poor) results.

To be fair, most of these conventional approaches to leadership work some of the time with some people. The problem lies in the fact that these same approaches often fail in many situations and can backfire with disastrous consequences in others. A consumer product with that kind of track record would not be on the market for long.

Now, this is not an indictment of the pioneering minds that helped us understand what

we now know today about this elusive phenomenon called leadership. There are important fundamental leadership dynamics that many brilliant authors and teachers have well articulated that any integral approach must include.

**The point is not that these conventional leadership insights are wrong. The point is that they are *partial*.**

They offer partial truths that can work some of the time. Yet, in many cases, they do not adequately take into account the diverse array of people that will be using the methods or the radically different situations involved. In fact, many of these authors make erroneous assumptions about the degree of homogeneity among the individual leaders (their capabilities), the individuals and groups that these people are leading (their psychological makeup), and the life circumstances in which these people find themselves (their different living/working environments and social systems).

### **Whose Advice Should We Take?**

There are countless leadership styles or “schools of leadership.” Some emphasize the character traits of the leader. Others emphasize leadership best practices. Those who wish to lead like Mary Kay Ash, Jack Welch, Meg Whitman, or Richard Branson can turn to books and articles to supposedly discover their secrets. Some of the more popular works related to styles emphasize the use of situational, transactional or transformational styles of leadership. Others may focus in on one particular style— authentic leadership, resonant leadership, Theory Y, or servant leadership.

When we scan the large body of literature of academic leadership theories (which we will summarize later in this article) as well as the many popular books on the practice of leadership by authors such as Jim Collins, Daniel Goleman, and Margaret Wheatley) we find much advice for aspiring leaders. However, it is important to recognize that despite the significant level of research that underlies much of it, most of the academic and popular literature amounts to *prescriptions*—a list of “shoulds” advising how to be successful and effective in the role of leader.

There is nothing inherently wrong with such prescriptions. Indeed, it is valuable to have the products of academic research and consultant experience. Yet it is absolutely crucial to remember that while elements of each of the above approaches are *true*, they are also all *partial*.

In instances where a specific leadership approach is conscientiously and correctly paired with the appropriate leader (given her capabilities), followers (given their worldviews and resonance with that approach), and situation (that actually needs

that approach) a given leadership method will work as advertised. The issue here should be clear. How often are these myriad approaches correctly paired with what is actually happening? The unfortunate answer is: extremely rarely.

Nearly every leadership approach has some merit. To illustrate how these approaches are true but partial, let's consider three diverse schools of leadership as described by popular authors with whom you may already be familiar.

Author **Bill George** former CEO of Medtronic and author of *Authentic Leadership* writes: “The test of leadership is ignoring those outside voices and learning to hear the one deep within. As a CEO, your attention ultimately has to be on the long run—and that is, of necessity, a lonely run. The voices clamoring for your attention will be many. Your job is to find your own.”

Bill George's “authentic leadership” approach is true but partial. It is true that if you are a leader who has developed your self-awareness and intuitive capacities to a sufficient level that you can actually recognize and distinguish your “inner voice,” then his brilliant articulation of authentic leadership is profound, inspiring, and applicable.

However, (here comes the partial piece) if you are in the estimated 60% of the population at earlier stages of development of self-awareness, and therefore lack this capacity, how would you know if you are hearing the *voice deep within* and not your critical parent voice, socially-defined cultural conditioning, or worse, some kind of delusional fantasy? Alas, not everyone possesses the ability to use all leadership approaches.

**Jon Katzenbach and Doug Smith** are world-renowned experts on leading teams. In their best-selling book *The Wisdom of Teams* (over 350,000 copies sold), they insist that teams that have a single leader are not real teams at all, and should merely be referred to as “groups.” In their view, only self-managed teams—teams that share leadership using an egalitarian and collaborative approach—are real teams. They believe that leadership should not come from a single individual, but rather, should emerge as a group phenomenon as a result of shared values and vision, open dialog, and mutual trust.

Here again, true but partial.

Katzenbach and Smith's assertions are true, if (and only if) you are leading a team in which every individual on that team values egalitarianism, shared responsibility, open dialogue, and mutual trust cultivated through vulnerability-based self-disclosure. Put more simply, this style of leadership will work perfectly if and only if you are leading a

team of people who all have a *Pluralistic worldview*.

The partial part?

Unfortunately, if you are leading one of the other types of teams (comprised of people that do not hold a Pluralistic worldview) that make up approximately 75% of the workforce, Katzenbach and Smith's approach will be ineffective at best, and disastrous at worst. We have personally seen the carnage that results when this "collaborative, sensitive, self-managed" approach is used with individuals and teams that don't share that value system.

Finally, let's consider a style of leadership that nearly every reader has already encountered. Thousands of top managers and Fortune 500 companies have followed its advice to give one-minute goals, one-minute praises, and one-minute reprimands. You guessed it. We are referring to **Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson's** *The One Minute Manager*. First published in 1982, it was widely lambasted by academics as a trite and shallow book that was downright offensive to intelligent readers. It has since sold over 9 million copies, been translated into over 25 languages, and is found on millions of leaders' bookshelves.

Integral psychology reveals the reason that this apparently overly-simplistic approach to leadership is so incredibly popular. In the 1980s, when this book came out, approximately 60% of the workforce consisted of people with a Traditional worldview who feel best-empowered when armed with a simple and concrete set of rules to follow. In the 1990s approximately 50% of the workforce was comprised of people with a Traditional worldview. In the 2000s, this approach is still true in the sense that 40% of the workforce (with a Traditional worldview) is well-suited to use this leadership style and will gladly follow leaders who use it.

The partial part? Unfortunately today, an estimated 60% of leaders view this approach as simple-minded and absurdly reductionistic. And if you try this style with about 60% of today's employees (in a typical corporation), they will look at you as if you are an idiot or laugh at you behind your back.

George, Katzenbach, Smith, Blanchard and Spencer all make the same mistake. Although, frankly, we seriously doubt if they really mind that they've made such a colossal error. Why wouldn't they mind? Well, to invoke a well-worn cliché, these best-selling authors are "laughing all the way to the bank." Nevertheless, it's easy to forgive the mistake since nearly all of the best-selling management and leadership authors make it.

What is the mistake? While it is already painfully apparent to our readers with a background in integral theory, it must not be that obvious because the most well-respected, and well-paid “experts” on leadership don’t see it. We call it the *Homogeneity Error*. It is the assumption that all leaders (or would-be-leaders) have the same psychological capacities, and that all followers benefit from (or need or want or will be resonant with) the same approaches.

Unfortunately extremely few conventional leadership experts benefit from a working knowledge of the field of integral psychology. If they did, this would be an obvious and easy mistake to avoid.

## **A Brief Summary of the Leadership Theories Incorporated into Integral Leadership**

All integral approaches are based in part on the adequate contextualization of the existing approaches. For purposes of comprehensiveness, we will quickly summarize the major theories that are being integrated into what we call integral leadership.

You do not need to learn all these theories. It is simply helpful to know that integral leadership takes all these perspectives into account.

1. ***Traditional Leadership Theories:*** Traditional leadership theories are based on “leadership laws” and/or “leader character traits.” Leadership laws (or principles) amount to concrete, unchanging rules that should be followed in every situation. Trait Theory (related to “Great Man Theory”) was largely discredited in the 80s only to be revitalized in the 90s, but is still highly disputed. Examples of character traits include: integrity, morals, trustworthiness, vision, judgment, achievement drive, charisma, and so on. Not surprisingly, these theories are produced by, and popular with, people holding a Traditional worldview (a.k.a. traditional values).
2. ***Competency Theory:*** This view is the result of a more modern take on traditional leadership theories. Applying modern psychological frameworks, these theorists suggest that rather than innate character traits, to be effective leaders must possess a specific set of abilities (competencies). Examples of competencies include: making difficult decisions, leading during a crisis, problem solving, developing and holding a vision, and inspiring others.
3. ***Visionary Leadership:*** This classic leadership style uses a leader’s compelling vision for the future to drive organizational change and individual performance. Visionary leaders are considered to have self-confidence and high cognitive

capability, and use power in different ways depending on the context of a given situation.

4. **Charismatic Leadership:** Related to Visionary Leadership, early proponents of the Charismatic Leadership theory believed that charisma was an individual character trait (that a person either had or didn't). Later advocates of this style see charisma emerging from relationship between leader and follower in which leader influences by what these theorists refer to as "weaving a spell."
5. **Transactional Leadership:** This style emphasizes extrinsic motivation in the form of rewards for desired follower behavior. It is concerned with what academics call "management by exception" and "contingency reward." This is a directive approach to influence that is closely related to the Strategic Leadership style described below.
6. **Pragmatic Leadership:** Proponents of this leadership theory consider this approach to be neither transactional, transformational, nor charismatic, but rather pragmatic involving a functional problem solving orientation. This style goes well with Strategic Leadership.
7. **Strategic Leadership:** As the term is usually used by theorists, this approach emphasizes vision, goal achievement, and rationally informed paths to success. Strategic leaders work with others to develop a shared vision and intelligent "plan" that leads to the accomplishment of goals and the steady improvement of the organization. Transactional, pragmatic, and strategic styles are most popular with people with a Modern worldview (a.k.a. scientific rationalism).
8. **Transformational Leadership:** Building on the work of James MacGregor Burns, transformational approaches (as contrasted with transactional methods) are more people-centric (humanistic) and emphasize tapping people's potential through meaning, shared learning, and mutual empowerment. There are many expressions of transformational leadership, all of which seek to inspire followers while drawing on Emotional Intelligence, social and political sensitivity, transparency and authenticity. Not surprisingly, these theories are produced by, and popular with, people with a Postmodern worldview (a.k.a. egalitarian, relativistic-pluralistic).
9. **Emergent Leadership Theory:** This view holds that leaders (and leadership) emerges from the group because of a desire to serve others. This theory suggests that the leaders the group will want to follow will possess the specific traits and competencies that the given situation, context, and challenge

requires. Like transformational theories, emergent leadership theories come from researchers with a Postmodern worldview.

10. ***Servant Leadership:*** Robert Greenleaf's approach that has variations in the work of Peter Block and many others. The essence of servant leadership is that the organizational chart is turned upside down. The CEO and senior leadership are servants of their direct reports, mid-level management serves the people they support, and the customer is at the (now) top of the org chart as the ultimate group to serve. Interestingly, this leadership style is popular both with people with a Traditional worldview and people with a Postmodern worldview.
11. ***Contingency Theories:*** This view holds that none of the above styles is best; rather, the best style depends on the circumstances. Fiedler's contingency theory suggests that task or people-oriented leadership style effectiveness depends on the situation (e.g. structure of work, position power, and relationship). Path-goal theory involves leaders incentivizing followers to hit milestones toward pre-defined goals. (This is essentially Fiedler plus motivation and is understandable popular with transactional and strategic leadership proponents.) Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid is based on two factors: task orientation vs. people orientation. Action-centered leadership theory is essentially Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid extended with the notion that effective leaders focus on task, team and individual. Bass and others have proposed a contingency model that includes: directive, consultative, participative, negotiative, and delegative approaches. Blanchard's popular Situational Leadership theory (which strictly speaking is model of management not leadership) encourages matching the management style with the preferred working style of subordinates based on the two poles of "direction" and "support."

Contingency theories like these might be considered an early intuition of the need for integral leadership. However, what is lacking in these approaches is an adequately comprehensive, accurate and reliable method for analyzing situations, especially the psychology of the people and groups involved.

## **The Promise of Integral Leadership**

We believe the time has come for the field of leadership theory to undergo a paradigm shift. A major contributing factor to this timing is globalization and complexity.

In previous times, when culture in many parts of the world (and many organizations) was homogenous, a single leadership approach could emerge that was suited to that

narrow band of life conditions and worldviews (value systems). As we write this in the early part of the 21st century, for most leaders those days have past.

It doesn't require much imagination to recognize the complexity of problems (and conditions, worldviews, worker types, etc.) that leaders face today. In fact, the term "complexity" is being used increasingly in boardrooms and in publications read by leaders. A 2010 study of global CEOs conducted by IBM in 2010 is particularly insightful. It lists complexity as the #1 concern of global CEOs.

No surprise. Due to globalization, cultural diversity, the accelerating evolution of technology, and the ever-increasing information and communication channels and choices, complexity is increasing at an alarming rate.

You may be familiar with Einstein's quote, "You cannot solve a problem with the same level of thinking that created the problem." My experience working with CEOs suggests that many leaders are not yet armed with a perspective sufficiently "next level" enough to solve their current-level problems. We have come to believe that an integrally-informed perspective is what is required to address many of the complex problems leaders face today.

What if it were possible to stitch all of these partial leadership theories together into a unified, comprehensive, inclusive, overarching theoretical framework that—as an integrated whole—could succeed where the individual parts previously failed?

**The promise of integral leadership is to know when, where and with whom a given leadership approach will reliably work (and when it will reliably fail).**

Integral leadership is an approach to leadership that is specifically designed to solve complex problems. The more complex the situation, the more advantage integral leadership has over conventional leadership approaches. We are reminded of Archimede's famous quote, "If I had a lever long enough, I could move the world." I believe that integral leadership provides that kind of leverage.

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