



Critically Reflective Leadership: Defining Successful Growth

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to propose a technique that can be used by emerging leaders when considering adopting the most appropriate leadership styles, behaviors or actions in a particular context. The authors review several different leadership models explored by scholars during the past six decades; not all of these models work for all leaders in all situations. In order to become effective leaders, authors propose the use of reflection-in-action to facilitate emerging leaders when faced with challenging situations. By considering a descriptive, yet brief informal checklist, the emerging leader can be supported in choosing from different models or approaches.

The practical application of this information is to assist those mentoring emerging leaders and leaders themselves to develop reflective practices and insightful dispositions necessary to navigate the complex situations encountered in today's daily interactive environments. This original work combines the literature of leadership with Schön's work on reflective practice. While it seems an obvious application of Schön, the concept of critically reflective leadership is not prevalent in the literature.

Keywords: Leadership; Critical self-reflection; Reflective practice

Critical self-reflection, considered the most important skill that educators can impart to an adult learner, is "a critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 186). This skill is a technique that facilitates an adult re-examining his or her basic beliefs in order to improve understanding. Compatible with critical reflection, Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner concludes that without critical reflection, the professional is bound to technical rationality. To further simplify, without critical reflection, professionals act as they are taught, or act based on experience. Schön (1983) asserts this is a limited form of practice; it is critical reflective practitioners think in action in order to be responsive, timely, and insightful. Using critical reflection, practitioners can think beyond their training and past experiences and explore, at least as a mental exercise, possibilities that have been beyond their experience. By mastering this skill set, this acquired tool will, presumably, lead to professional growth (Schön, 1983).

Critical self-reflection has applications beyond professional practice. Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, and Harding (2012) argue that critical thought is a key part of effective leadership and that college graduates have, for the most part, not developed the techniques necessary to reflect on their performance as leaders. In school, students learn models and frameworks that will be transferred to their lifeworld after leaving the academic environment. Schön (1983) refers to this as technical rationality. Comer (2016) found this practice does not work because of the unique and conflicting aspects of the dynamic work environment. Professionals reflect on practice and modify their mental models based on experience. This reflection may be tacit or thoughtful, and the practitioners fit their teaching to their experience. Schön (1983) and Comer (2016) assert that thoughtful and purposeful reflection leads to more accurate and robust mental models of practice.

Beyond the ability to master critical reflection to help an individual become a successful leader, it is important to examine the different qualifiers that individuals in effective leadership positions exhibit. Since the middle of the 20th century, scholars continue to define the attributes of successful leadership using several different models. After World War II, research focused on explaining how an entire country could follow the leadership of someone as evil as Hitler. The Authoritarian Model describes leaders that demanded absolute obedience from followers (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Other models were developed to describe more socially acceptable practices of leadership. Charismatic Leadership emerged from the writing of Weber (2009) and continues to be cited in scholarly work since the 1940s (Conger

& Kanungo, 1987). Conger and Kanungo (1987) describe a Charismatic Leader as a likeable person whose power is based on expertise, respect, and admiration. The Path Goal Leadership model (Vroom, 1964; House, 1971) describes the function of leaders as providing a motivating environment for their subordinates. Another leadership model, Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002), presents a model wherein the leader works to satisfy the needs of those being led. Additionally, the Authentic Leadership model (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004) expects leaders to act in a manner consistent with their beliefs. It relies on a belief that all individuals in an organization are willing to act towards the goals of the organization. The Spiritual Leadership model (Fry, 2003) builds on intrinsic motivation of members and individuals and highlights working in service to the key stakeholders of the organization; altruistic love is regarded as integral within an understanding of leadership. Finally, Burns (1978) differentiates between Transactional Leadership, which relies on a system of quid pro quo exchanges between the leaders and followers and Transformational Leadership, a model which relies on motivating followers to identify with something—an organization or cause—larger than themselves.

Scholars wishing to isolate distinct practices of effective leaders developed numerous instruments to measure the characteristics or behaviors of leaders. Several leadership assessment instruments are currently in use. For example, scholars developed the F-scale (F stands for fascist) to measure characteristics associated with an Authoritarian Personality (Vroom & Mann, 1960). Another example, the Spiritual Assessment Scale, measures factors associated with Spiritual Leadership (Beazley, 1998). Additionally, the Leadership Practices Inventory (Posner & Kouzes, 1988) is widely used to measure leader performance on five distinct components of effective leadership. In sum, each of these instruments measure attributes associated with one or more models of leadership. Although these instruments are deemed effective in case-by-case research examples, none seem to apply to all the models of leadership.

While instruments that measure attributes are useful in academic settings, a practicing reflective leader would not be able to do a formal assessment to determine which model of leadership is more closely aligned with their personality and which leadership model might be most effective for a particular context. Instead, a reflective leader would examine his or her values, beliefs, behaviors, and impact on the organization as compared against some set of internal criteria. He or she then modifies those values, beliefs, and behaviors to become a “better” leader. What makes this reflective process so daunting a task is the decades of academic history describing the attributes of effective leadership. The resulting descriptions describe an assorted miscellany of occasionally incompatible leadership attributes.

The purpose of this discussion is to propose a means by which leaders, attempting to become critically reflective, can determine criteria that can be used to further his or her growth as an effective leader. First, several models of leadership will be described. Then using the existing leadership literature, characteristics of self-reflective assessment are described for each type of leadership.

Models of Leadership

Several models of leadership exist in both the scholarly and popular literature. Additionally, this discussion includes models that were considered important to particular fields of academic endeavors or research. This analysis does not attempt to describe all possible models; rather, this content identifies the more well-known models from which characteristics of effective leadership may be gleaned.

Table 1 displays nine models of leadership and the scholars whose work undergirds each model.

Table 1

Models of leadership with foundational authors

Model	Reference
Authentic Leadership	(Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009)
Authoritarian Leadership	(Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Vroom & Mann, 1960)
Charismatic Leadership	(Weber, 2009)
Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership Model	(Kouzes & Posner, 2006)
Path Goal Leadership	(House, 1971)
Servant Leadership	(Greenleaf, 2002)
Spiritual Leadership	(Fry, 2003)
Transactional Leadership	(Burns, 1978)
Transformational Leadership	(Burns, 1978)

To further the reasoning essential for this analysis, it is important to begin with a brief overview of the models of leadership considered as important.

Authoritarian Leadership

Descriptions of Authoritarian Leadership emerged in the years immediately after World War II (Vroom & Mann, 1960). Scholars sought to understand how entire nations willingly conformed to the will of authoritarian leaders like Hitler, Mussolini, or Stalin who espoused dictatorial values and practices that were inconsistent with the norms of a democratic society (Adorno et al, 1950). Authoritarian leaders rely on their power relationships with followers to force compliance (Schuh, Zhang, & Tian, 2013). This model of leadership has been called “command and control,” and is associated with the Theory X (MacGregor, 1960) concept of leadership. Distance is maintained between leader and followers and most communication flows from the leader to

the followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Authoritarian leaders work without regard for the well-being of followers (Schuh et al, 2013).

Charismatic Leadership

In this model of leadership, followers in the organization do not rally around the formal leader in fear of an external threat. Instead, they seek the leadership of an individual whom they believe exhibits the skill, values and goals congruent with their own worldview. Grabo and van Vugt (2016) assert that followers are attracted to the charismatic leader and use that attraction as a focus to orient their activities. Weber (2009) described charisma as a characteristic of leadership as early as 1947, and researchers continued to attribute worker motivation to external charisma well into the 1970s (Alschuler & Thompson, 1969; Juan, 1967; Vroom, 1964).

Path Goal Leadership

Path Goal Leadership also makes worker motivation a duty of the leader. In this model, personal charisma is not the motivator, instead the leader's role is to help link worker or follower effort with positive communities or organizational goals (House, 1971). The foundation for this model of leadership is found in the expectancy theory of motivation (Vroom, 1964). Other scholars examined motivating factors for workers with one of the most notable models of worker motivation, namely the 2-factor model of worker motivation (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 2011). Presumably, leaders motivate followers. House (1971) describes a mathematical approach to Path Goal Leadership where worker motivators are related to actions.

Transactional Leadership

This model bears similarities to Path Goal Leadership. Leaders still work to provide external motivators to followers (or workers) (Burns, 1978). In this model of leadership, leaders depend on communications between the leader and the followers. Following is dependent on consent of the followers (Burns, 1978).

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) contrasted Transformational and Transactional Leadership, describing Transactional Leadership as a more traditional model and Transformational Leadership as a more holistic approach. Transformational Leaders raise followers' levels of awareness of the vision of the future and provide a set of morale and motivational factors that guide the actions of the organization. Burns also described alignment of follower skills with the tasks required to meet organizational goals. Bass (1985) argued that leaders could be transactional or transformational depending on the context. Schuh et al (2013) maintain that transformational leading is amoral and that leaders could use this model of leadership to motivate their followers for good or bad.

Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership Model

Kouzes and Posner (2006) proposed a model of leadership that is frequently cited. The model includes five practices of leadership:

- Model the Way

- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Posner & Kouzes, 1988).

The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) measures these five practices of leadership. This inventory is widely used and cited. This model, like several others, focuses on leaders' roles in providing external motivation to followers.

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (2002) describes a model where one of the main roles of leadership is stewardship for the followers. Simply put, the leader acts as a servant/enabler in ways that support followers as they focus on achievement of the organizational goals. Greenleaf first put forth this model of leadership in the 1980s, and it is cited and implemented by numerous scholars throughout a number of research endeavors. There are several instruments that have been described to measure aspects of Servant Leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis, Kinzler-Norheim, & Bocarnea, 2010; Laub, 1999; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Wong, Davey, & Church, 2007). While Servant Leadership indicates a strong intuitive appeal among practitioners and scholars, research on this model of leadership continues.

Spiritual Leadership

More than one model of leadership represents Spiritual Leadership (Beazley, 1998; Fry, 2003), but Fry's description predominates. The key characteristic described by Fry is altruistic love. Fry, Vetucci, and Cedillo (2005) provide an instrument to measure the characteristics of Spiritual Leadership.

Authentic Leadership

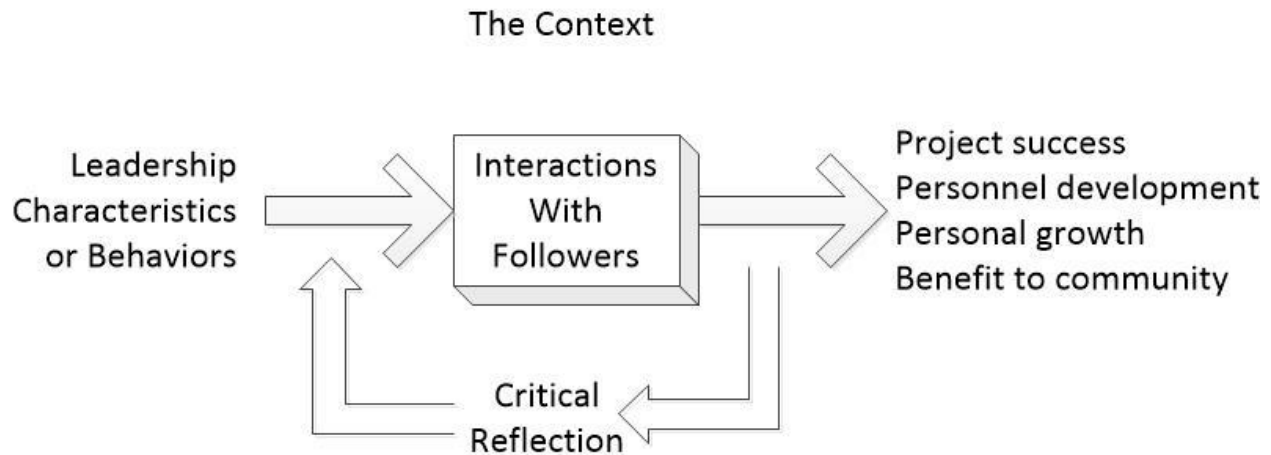
As the name implies, Authentic Leaders share their actual emotions, beliefs, and goals with their followers (Avolio et al, 2009). One of the main mechanisms of Authentic Leadership is the promotion of trust and belief in others among-and- between both the followers and the leaders. According to Gardner and Schermerhorn (2004), trust and belief in others lead to positive organizational behaviors and self-efficacy in the individual and the organization. Walumbwa et al. (2008) developed and validated an instrument to measure Authentic Leadership.

Leadership as an Open System

To conceptualize critical reflection in leadership, the process of leadership will be described using the lens of open systems theory (Scott & Davis, 2007). Open systems consist of inputs and outputs, the processes within the system boundaries and the context (or environment) in which the system operates. Feedback is a reflective process that allows adjustment to the system. Figure

1 is a representation of leadership when considered as an open system. Here, leader characteristics or attributes are the system inputs. Interactions of the leader with followers are the primary processes and actions of individuals or organizations, as outputs, become the outcomes. The context defines the resources, goals, and limitations.

Figure 1: Leadership as a system



Open systems are not inherently stable. The system is normally monitored and adjusted to compensate for perturbations or instability. Watch someone driving down a straight road. Ideally no steering would be required. However, in even this most unchanging situation, the driver will make small adjustments to the steering. In a generic open system, feedback can be based on observed attributes of the context, inputs, processes, or outputs. Feedback is then used to adjust the system. Depending on the system and the situation, adjustments can be made to the inputs, the processes or even the contexts.

For leadership, feedback is the process of critical reflection on the leader's style and practices. In other words, the critically reflective leader will be aware of personal goals, context, his or her own attributes, and actions and his or her impacts on the actions of individuals or the outcomes of organizations. The reflective analysis of the leader intends to contribute to individual growth and improvement. The intention of the current analysis is not to describe a new model of leadership, but to support emerging leaders by describing existing models of leadership to illustrate the potential of using critical reflection on their personal style of leadership.

Leader Characteristics

The scholars who have conceptualized the various models of leadership take pains to clearly identify the traits and behaviors of an ideal leader. For example, charismatic leaders are described as having excellent interpersonal skills (Grabo & van Vugt, 2016) while servant

leaders are depicted as serving the needs of their followers (Greenleaf, 2002). Here we describe four aspects of leadership common across various leadership models.

Interaction with followers

In many cases, leadership can be defined by the interactions or relationship between the leader and followers. Authentic leaders rely on trust to maintain motivation. Path Goal leaders carefully define organizational goals to provide external motivation for followers. In the Five Practices model, motivation is provided by the interactions of the leader with the followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2006).

Actions and development of followers

Most of the models describe steps by the leader to develop the followers or, at least to, monitor their performance. Advocates of the Servant and Spiritual Leadership models both focus on the primary need to care for, and support development of their followers.

Outcomes

Authoritarian, Path Goal, and Transactional models of leadership include a focus on outcomes in the traditional sense. That is, these models focus on motivating followers to meet organizational goals. Authentic, Transformational, Spiritual, and Servant leadership models acknowledge follower growth and satisfaction as valid goals.

Success, reward, and growth

Authoritarian Leadership is one of the theories that seems to acknowledge the leader as interested in the leadership process. Realistically, leaders can be motivated by altruistic or personal goals. In practice, most leaders tend to be motivated by a combination of both. Leaders want the same things that the followers want, such as wanting to do a good job, and recognition for accomplishments. Inevitably, leaders will want to grow in some way (personally or professionally). Any model of leadership that ignores these motivators is incomplete.

Critically Reflective Leadership

Most leadership models are prescriptive. They tell the reader what characteristics are found in leaders. These can be thought of as learning outcomes or competencies for someone learning to lead. Hopefully, these characteristics are transferred to practice and result in the effective implementation of leadership; however, the actions of leadership are similar to professional practice. It takes time and effort to successfully apply these skills or behaviors. Schön (1983) asserts that it is critical for practitioners to reflect-in-action to improve their practice. In fact, he argues it is essential that reflection-in-action be taught to potential leaders. This reflection-in-action is one form of critical self-reflection.

Adopting reflection-in-action is integral for nascent leaders to fully develop skills and dispositions. Leaders think through what they are doing and provide themselves with critique. At this point in their development and practice, the models of leadership begin to provide less

support. Just as in any professional practice, the learning objectives or competencies are a start, but now transfer to effective practice. In leadership, the context is unique and changing. Individuals change and grow; the goals, contexts, organizations, and problems remain as dynamic.

The critically reflective leader will want to individually assess the organization's or individual's progress towards goals and then, modify behaviors to meet those unique goals. Obviously, this implies the leader knows what the goals are which is not always clear. In some cases, the objectives of the organization are paramount; in other instances, the development of the team or individual team members become key goals. The success of the leader is a necessary goal if the leader wants to continue leading; effective leaders realize leadership is a complex balance of difficult goals.

The intellectual balance of potentially competing goals defines critically reflective leadership. Ideally, leaders would always seek development and job satisfaction for their followers, but many times resource limitations will force a choice between "getting the job done" or allowing individuals to develop their skills. In other situations, the goals of the organization may conflict with the values of the leader. In these cases, the leader chooses between being a "successful" leader or being true to his or her personal values. (In extreme cases, the leader may need to seek membership in other organizations). The practicing leader may draw on characteristics from different models of leadership depending on the contexts and the goals that are most important at the time. For example, when it comes to compliance with laws or regulations, the most authentic leader may adopt some authoritarian behaviors. When followers demonstrate personal issues that limit their effectiveness, a Path Goal leader may seek other paths to allow the individual to mediate their individual issues without sacrificing the goals of the organization.

This is not to say leaders can abandon all consistency and act completely differently based on the situation. Leaders evidence constraint as guided by their values, the ethical guidelines of the context, and applicable laws and regulations. Followers look to their leaders for well-defined and consistent behaviors and would be troubled by apparently random shifts in the behaviors of their leaders.

The critical leadership checklist

Schön (1983) and Mezirow (1998) believe that critical reflection should be taught to leaders. Assuming the beginning leader understands the process of reflection-in-action, the process might be described with the following checklist questions:

What are the goals here? Identify the organizational goals keeping in mind that there may be different categories of goals that are not obvious. For example, solving a labor issue will have an impact on the profit of the organization, compliance with federal or state labor laws, and/or community relations.

In academic settings, it is difficult to simulate the several diverse goals faced by leaders in real-world settings. There are often situations where the goals conflict to varying degrees. Goals are also not static. They change over time. New goals may emerge before existing goals are met.

Leaders set the priorities (to some extent) and set schedules, allocate resources, and communicate goals and strategies.

Do the goals of individuals need to be considered? As intimated in the last section, real-world settings involve multiple goals competing for limited resources. When setting priorities and leading organizations, leaders evaluate the needs of individuals as well as the needs of the organization(s). For example, there may be someone who will gain experience or knowledge (or grow in other ways) by working on a particular goal. The leader may need to seek the best balance among potentially incompatible goals.

For the current situations, what leadership skills or behaviors should be employed for the current situation? Multiple diverse goals call for diverse actions or behaviors. Even in the same time frame, the leader may need to vary his or her approach to particular goals. The leader will then call on skills or behaviors described in the various models of leadership. As noted previously, different contexts will call for different skills or behaviors and not all leadership models apply to every setting.

What constraints apply to the situation? Constraints apply to every issue a leader may encounter. Many of the constraints can be addressed through planning and communication. For example, obtaining enough people or resources is an activity that is done by leaders. However, some of the constraints are due to limits within the organization, personal values and ethics, or legal limits on activities. Leaders may find behaviors or skills for dealing with these constraints in one or more models of leadership. Authentic leadership may be more effective for working with followers to deal with difficult non-ideal situations than an authoritarian leader that leaves followers frustrated and constrained to failure.

How will I assess progress and success? Sometimes achieving the organizational goals is not the only measure of success. Leaders develop followers, and allowing them to gain experience is often a measure of success. In other cases, organizational goals can be clearly assessed. It may be that failure may possess pedagogical value that can be utilized by supportive leadership.

How will progress and success be documented? Outcomes do not speak for themselves. Others in the organization and independent of the organization need to know what progress is being made and what goals are being met. It is important to the followers and the leader that their work is documented and acknowledged.

This mental checklist can trigger critical reflection within developing leaders. Many times, leaders will find themselves completing this sort of checklist without formal thought. Formalizing this process allows leaders to consider other leadership skills or behaviors that may work more effectively in particular situations. By considering and using different behaviors or skills perhaps drawn from various models of leadership, the leader continues to develop.

Limitations to this process exist. Not all developing leaders will be adept in all the possible leadership skills and behaviors. Many organizations offer leadership development opportunities to their emerging leaders, but many do not. Individual leaders can work past this limitation by reading the popular academic writings on leadership. Not all leaders will be comfortable with all

the behaviors described in the models of leadership because leaders will have different opportunities, challenges, personalities, and cultural experiences. Although individual leaders can work past their personal preferences for a leadership style, these preferences can act as constraints for leaders.

Conclusion

Critically reflective leadership would be simple if the leader selects one model of leadership and consistently follows a single approach. Some models focus on organizational outcomes without regard to how the outcomes are achieved. Other models focus on treatment of followers with less attention to organizational outcomes. Perhaps effective leadership cannot be summarized in one model. For example, a leader may sometimes spend a substantial time mentoring individuals for them to be able to develop needed skills. However, critical circumstances may require a leader to forsake the long-term individual goals and focus on the organizational outcomes. Therefore, a reflective leader may have to apply different mental models of leadership to different situations.

The leadership literature provides numerous models of leadership that describe the characteristics of leaders. None of these models seem to prescribe a set of behaviors or characteristics that could be applied in all contexts. Like most prescriptive models of behavior, the practicing leader must transfer these characteristics to real-world applications. In order to develop, it is integral for the leader to learn to reflect-in-action and adapt their behaviors to the situation. This adaptation process can be called critically reflective leadership and provides a flexible, personal, and dynamic quality to support effective leadership. In effective practice, a critically reflective leader balances individual and organizational goals and modifies their behaviors to achieve the most important goals.

The practical application of critical reflection empowers emerging leaders to develop the skills and dispositions needed to address the new and reoccurring challenges of today's work environment and to become effective leaders. Critical reflection is the essential skill in effective leader development.

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