

**“*Learning Leadership*’; explaining social processes influencing followers’ transformational leadership capability development, to support organisational change”**

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## Abstract

*The proposed research addresses followers' leadership capability development to maximise corporate transformation effectiveness.*

*In contrast to traditional, positivist leadership studies based on theory-testing, this research adopts critical realism and grounded theory methodology to understand how social processes of 'followership' influence followers' leadership learning.*

*Anticipated contributions include: integrating and extending diverse, acquired wisdom; a substantive grounded theory explaining social processes of 'followership'; supporting a 'leadership' paradigm shift by adopting a follower-centric perspective and conceptualising 'followership' as social process; maximising the study's explanatory power through a qualitative, emergent methodology; enriching understanding of 'followership' social processes, which has potential implications for leadership development across organisations.*

**Keywords:** followership; transformational leadership; social processes; learning; critical realism; grounded theory

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## 1.0 Business Context & Problem

Contemporary organisations operate in unstable environments. To ensure corporate survival, strategic leaders must continually reconcile the paradox of performance delivery and strategic adaptation (Yukl, 2008). Escalating operational complexity and continuous transformation have intensified the requirement for adaptable leaders at all levels (eg. Kanter, 1999; Huy, 2001, 2002; Balogun, 2003). Although significant resources are devoted to the selection and development of leaders (eg. Northouse, 2007; Murphy & Ensher, 2008), effective leadership, considered a critical contributor to transformation success (eg. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2005), remains a scarce, corporate ‘natural resource’ (Tichy & Devanna, 1990). For Kotter (1995, 1996), inadequate leadership is a significant factor in the continued, low success rate of corporate transformation initiatives (Beer & Nohria, 2000; McKinsey Quarterly, 2008); this represents a significant issue for organisations.

The business problem to be addressed is:

- *“How will organisations acquire appropriate leadership resource to improve performance and sustain strategic adaptation, in continuously transforming environments?”*

## 2.0 Research Context & Problem

Multiple studies (3 000+) (Bass, 1990) have advanced leadership knowledge. However, some academics question the actual progress made in explaining leadership (eg. Ciulla, 2008). Some cite an over-emphasis on individual leaders and positivist studies, which have resulted in insufficient consideration and poor understanding of other aspects of leadership (eg. context, social processes and followers) (Yukl, 1999, 2006; Popper, 2002; Conger & Toegel, 2002). This limits the applicability of extant leadership theory for business practice (Parry & Meindl, 2002a).

The best-validated theory, Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), presents a normative model for effective, individual leaders, defining the optimum form of leadership practice as *'authentic transformational leadership'* (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Authentic transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers, 'transforming' them into transformational leaders who can achieve extraordinary outcomes for their organisations.

However, 'leadership' is not the exclusive premise of strategic 'leaders' (Bass & Riggio, 2006). To succeed, today's complex organisations require the collaboration of multiple 'followers' (Yukl, 2008) - managers at all levels who may assume a leadership role contingent on situational demands. Scholars therefore need to refocus their efforts to address the problem:

- ***“How will individual followers’ authentic transformational leadership capability be developed and embedded across multiple levels and functions in contemporary organisations, to deliver performance targets and effective business transformation interventions?”***

This new perspective requires a paradigm shift which leverages and extends acquired wisdom and adopts a 'follower-centric' approach (Kelley, 1998, 2008; Riggio et al, 2008) with the assumption that “... *Leadership can occur at all levels and by any individual.*” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p.2). Qualitative empirical approaches represent the most viable basis for understanding 'followership' in organisations, and social processes influencing followers' transformational leadership learning (Conger, 1998; Parry, 1998; Day, 2001; Bryman, 2004).

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### 3.0 Research Objectives

- To enhance understanding of the nature of ‘followership’ and the social, relational processes which produce this phenomenon in continuously transforming organisations
- To understand how social, relational processes of ‘followership’ influence individual followers’ learning and development of authentic transformational leadership capability and adaptability across multiple functions and levels in continuously transforming organisations
- To generate a substantive grounded theory which explains the social processes of ‘followership’, contributing to collective understanding of the phenomenon of ‘followership’

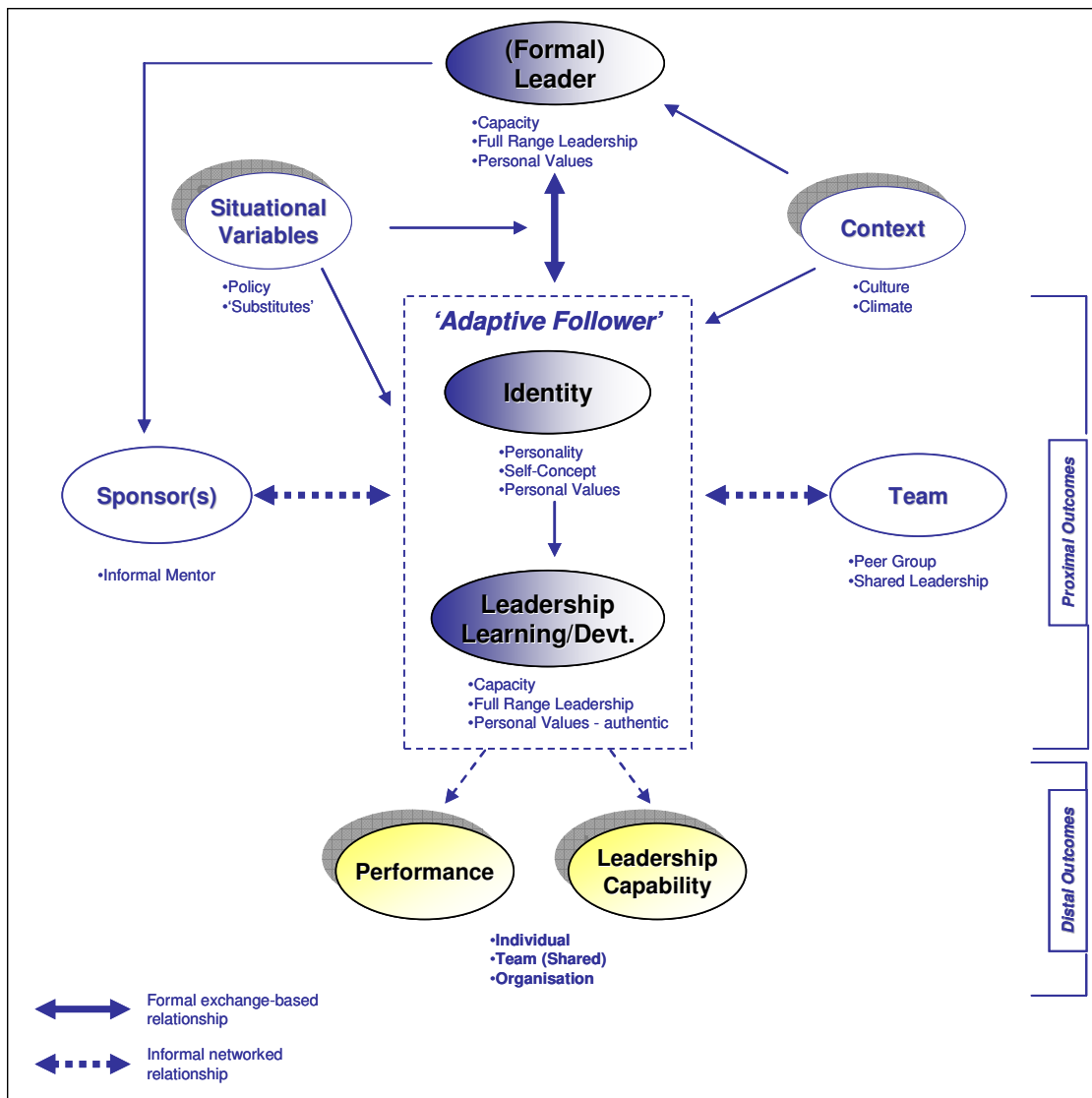
### 4.0 Theoretical Framework & Research Question

The leadership field is characterised by a paucity of cross-disciplinary studies, knowledge fragmentation and a lack of theoretical integration. An integrative framework is therefore proposed to inform the proposed qualitative empirical study (Figure 1). The framework assumes a follower-centric perspective, presents ‘followership’ as a contextualised, social process and incorporates leadership learning by integrating extant theories from diverse disciplines:

- **Organisation Theory: *Change*** (eg. Lewin, 1947(a); Kotter, 1995, 1996; Beer & Nohria, 2000); ***Leadership*** (MacGregor Burns, 1978, 2003; Full Range Leadership (Bass, 1985); Shared Leadership (Pearce & Sims, 2002); Self-Leadership (Manz & Sims, 1980, 1987)); ***Followership*** (Kelley, 1998, 2008; Riggio et al, 2008); ***Social Exchange*** (Leader-Member Exchange (eg. Dansereau et al, 1975); Social Networks (eg. Sparrowe et al, 2001)).

- **Social Psychology :** *Social Influence Theory* (eg. Turner, 1991, 2006); *Social Identity Theory* (eg. Tajfel, 1982; Giddens, 1991)).
- **Personal Values:** (eg. Schwartz, 1992, 1994).
- **Individual Learning:** *Learning Theory* (eg. Lewin, 1947(b); Kolb, 1984; Argyris & Schon, 1996); *Social Learning/Cognitive Theory* (Bandura, 1977, 1986); *Self-Efficacy Theory* (Bandura, 1997; Lord & Brown, 2004)).
- **Management Theory:** *Leader/Leadership Development* (eg. Day, 2001; Kempster, 2006, 2009).

**Figure 1: Followers' Authentic Transformational Leadership Development**  
 - An Integrative Framework to Guide Empirical Study



The proposed study will specifically investigate the relationship-based, social influence processes through which followers learn leadership, by addressing the following research questions:

- *“What is the nature of the social, relational processes of 'followership' and how do these influence individual followers' authentic transformational leadership learning and capability development across multiple functions and levels in continuously transforming organisations?”*
  
- *What is the notion of 'adaptability' within 'followership' and how do the social, relational processes of 'followership' influence individual followers' learning and development of adaptability across multiple functions and levels in continuously transforming organisations?”*

## **5.0 Philosophical Research Position**

The philosophical tradition within the leadership field is positivism. Positivism is based on the ontological assumption that reality is external and objective and the epistemological assumption that knowledge is acquired through observation of external reality. Positivism favours scientific methods; however, deductive, quantitative empirical approaches cannot capture the complexities of 'leadership' (eg. Conger & Toegel, 2002; Yukl, 2006).

Remenyi et al (2005) assert that the same phenomenon may be studied by adopting different philosophical positions and empirical approaches, to provide new knowledge and deeper understanding. An alternative philosophical research position and aligned empirical approach are therefore proposed, which are appropriate for the study of context, social processes and behaviours, to investigate social processes underpinning followers' leadership learning.

The proposed philosophical research position is critical realism, which provides an alternative to positivism and interpretivism and combines aspects of both (Sayer, 2000). Ontologically, critical realism, like positivism, acknowledges an external, objective reality, but acknowledges that concepts are human, perception-based constructions. Epistemologically, critical realism posits that knowledge is based on individuals' (re)interpretation of their social experiences. Critical realism is therefore considered an appropriate philosophical research position for the proposed study, with its aim of understanding contextualised social influence processes which actively impact followers' leadership learning.

## **6.0 Research Methodology**

### **6.1 Grounded Theory Methodology**

The proposed study deploys grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a qualitative, "... *inductive, theory-building process of inquiry.*" (Parry & Meindl, 2002b, p.202). Parry (1998; personal correspondence, 2009) considers a critical realist philosophical research position supported by grounded theory methodology to be a valid approach for research into social influence processes, with the objective of building rather than testing theory. Locke (2005) argues that this approach captures context and complexity; integrates theory with practice by accessing practitioner knowledge to support theory-building; and promotes cross-disciplinary enquiry.

The proposed methodology will incorporate data triangulation, integrating qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources to provide deep insights into the 'followership' phenomenon. The aim is to identify concepts and hypotheses associated with social processes of 'followership', to develop a substantive grounded theory which will be inductively developed from evidence collected.

## 6.2 Study Context & Population Composition

The context for the proposed study is private sector, multi-national, professional services organisations. Studies in this sector are limited; target organisations provide complex, transforming environments in which to examine social processes of ‘followership’.

The research population comprises **followers** - managers at all levels who may assume a leadership role based on situational demands. This group is distinct from ‘top team’ leaders. The target population is primarily ‘in-group’ followers who have high-quality, ‘high-exchange’ relationships with their formal leader (Dansereau et al, 1975). These followers are assumed to have high exposure to the social processes of ‘followership’ and are likely to adopt leadership roles. In addition, individuals identified by ‘in-group’ followers as significant for their leadership learning (Kempster, 2006, 2009) will also be interviewed, to provide a ‘360-degree’ perspective, essential to understanding of relational, social processes (Parry, 1998). Such respondents may include followers’ formal and informal leaders, mentors, peers and reports.

## 7.0 Research Techniques

### 7.1 Grounded Theory Process

In contrast to quantitative approaches which consider data collection and analysis as separate, sequential phases, the grounded theory process is essentially integrative. Data collection, analysis and theory-building will be conducted iteratively and concurrently, and theory-building *grounded* in empirical evidence. The operational and interpretive aspects of the proposed study will follow prescribed procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Locke, 2005), enabling effective collation, analysis and interpretation of significant quantities of unstructured data, maximising opportunities to build understanding and achieve validity.

## 7.2 Data Triangulation & Instruments

The research will examine social processes of ‘followership’ from multiple viewpoints. A range of qualitative and quantitative instruments will be deployed, supporting data triangulation (Egri & Herman, 2000; Conger & Toegel, 2002). The breadth and depth of evidence obtained will enable multiple analyses to clarify the complex phenomenon and processes, and enhance validity. Predominant data sources will be formal, semi-structured interviews with individual participants and informal, unstructured interviews; both will focus on ‘how’ followers learn leadership. Interviews will be supplemented by non-participant observation, reviews of relevant documentation and a quantitative survey. The specific quantitative instrument is under investigation. This may incorporate one or more *a priori* instruments and will be designed to generate cross-referential data (Mason, 2002).

## 7.3 Sampling Strategy

The proposed method will deploy both statistical and ‘*theoretical sampling*’ (actively gathering data which most supports theory-building) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to target respondents. Initial follower respondents will be randomly selected from multiple contexts, levels, functions and career development stages (Bryman et al, 1994; Parry, 1998). Subsequently, theoretical sampling will identify additional respondents whose inputs are relevant to achieving clarification and saturation of concepts and theoretical interrelationships. The qualitative sample size will be determined by ‘*theoretical saturation*’; the interview set is considered complete when no incremental data is being identified. The quantitative survey sample is dependent on the selected technique and instrument. Sample options include follower interviewees; all qualitative respondents; reports of follower interviewees; or a separate sample which mirrors the qualitative sample.

#### 7.4 Evidence Collection

Organisational contexts will be explored without reference to extant theory; the researcher's *'theoretical sensitivity'* will guide enquiry and inform (but not influence) grounded theory generation. Planned and opportunistic data collection from multiple sources will continue throughout the study. Following each formal interview, emerging themes will be summarised and indicative interview questions reformulated to ensure that understanding is extended through subsequent discussions. The researcher's emerging interpretations and insights will be captured through ongoing 'memoing' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2005).

#### 7.5 Evidence Analysis & Theory-Building

Atlas software will be used for qualitative (re)analysis of qualitative data, to ensure analytical rigour. Survey data will be analysed quantitatively, using SPSS software. Qualitative data may be further analysed, quantitatively, whilst quantitative data may be reinterpreted qualitatively, to generate further insights.

Data collection, analysis and conceptualisation will be conducted concurrently during the study through the systematic, inductive process of *'constant comparative analysis'* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), or *'analytic induction'* (eg. Silverman, 1993; Johnson, 2006). This approach will use an *'open coding'* scheme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) derived from initial data to identify preliminary concepts. New data will be collected, analysed and compared with previous analyses to develop working hypotheses regarding concepts and theoretical links between them. Progressively targeted evidence collection and analysis, reinterpretation of existing data and constant data comparison will be undertaken to investigate working hypotheses, clarify themes and establish interrelationships. Progressive generation of higher levels of conceptual abstraction, through *'theoretical coding'* (Glaser, 1978) will ultimately produce categories and interrelationships which describe social processes of followership within the contexts investigated, resulting in an

explanatory, grounded theory. These may be represented as a hierarchy of abstraction model (Parry & Meindl, 2002).

## **8.0 Anticipated Findings**

The holistic methodology will enable analysis of rich, contextualised evidence to develop a precise depiction of followers' perspectives. This will support generation of in-depth, explanatory insights into the 'followership' phenomenon, and the nature and function of the interpersonal, social processes through which 'followership' is learned, developed and enacted within a dynamic, substantive organisational context. Grounded theory methodology also allows for the emergence of unforeseen constructs, which may provide additional insights.

## **9.0 Anticipated Contribution**

*Theory:* the study should support future formal 'Followership' theory-building: first, by adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to leverage and extend acquired wisdom; second, by creating a substantive grounded theory contributing to collective understanding of the 'followership' phenomenon.

*Research Methodology:* the explanatory power of empirical research will be enhanced by adopting a philosophical position (Critical Realism) and methodology (grounded theory) appropriate for the context-based study of socio-behavioural aspects of 'followership'.

*Research Knowledge:* The research will add to the limited body of 'followership' studies, advancing knowledge, and potentially contribute to a new, 'followership' paradigm by adopting a follower-centric perspective and re-conceptualising 'leadership' as a social process of 'followership'.

*Practical Knowledge:* The study will enable improved understanding of social processes of 'followership' in organisations, which underpin followers' leadership learning and adaptability. Such knowledge has potential implications for people development strategies, and may be significant for delivery of effective transformation initiatives.

## **10.0 Limitations**

### **10.1 Methodology**

The subjective nature of grounded theory methodology risks researcher bias and reduced validity. Potential bias should be mitigated and validity reinforced by deploying in-depth interviewing as the predominant data-gathering method and data and theory triangulation; applying inter-rater reliability principles; using Atlas software for data coding; and undertaking face validation of findings with research participants. Validity may be further constrained by limited organisational contexts and a small, unrepresentative sample, which restricts options for quantitative data analysis (although exploratory data analysis techniques may be used).

The researcher's '*theoretical sensitivity*' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) will enable comparison of grounded and extant theories. If the emerging grounded theory is supported by extant theory and variations are explained by contextual factors, then it may be considered 'reliable'. However, claims of generalisability for any emerging grounded theory will be problematic, as outcomes will be relevant only to the substantive contexts investigated; implications for other populations cannot be inferred.

### **10.2 Knowledge**

Accounts of social processes of 'followership' will not be exhaustive, and emergent grounded theory only substantive to the research context. Findings may make a

preliminary contribution to future practical approaches addressing followers' effective leadership learning, and the embedding of leadership capability within organisations.

## **11.0 Further Research**

Continued study of 'followership' through replication studies would support generalisability. More extensive studies could: explore alternative contexts and populations, generating multiple perspectives; incorporate multiple researchers, methodological triangulation and representative samples to enable more rigorous quantitative analysis. Longitudinal studies would enhance understanding of continuous social processes of 'followership'. Ultimately, hypothesised models, derived from substantive grounded theory may be operationalised for testing, to generate a formal theory explaining social processes of 'followership' in organisations.

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