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# Deconstructing Leadership: Engaging Leading through a Socially Constructed Process

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## Abstract

In this chapter, leadership is examined through a socially constructed process. Focus is directed at being able to engage alternative perspectives regarding leadership and a leader, and the significance of professional development in developing leaders' capabilities and characters. Through the lens of leading and leadership, an outline of understanding leadership as a construction is presented, by exploring the notion of leading as a dynamic contradictory and enigmatical construct within the leadership discourse generally and educational leadership in particular. While educational leadership has largely been topical over time, leading and leadership development within socially demanding contexts largely remains a path for deeper exploration. Moving through various levels to understand educational leadership better, the chapter channels attention on deconstruction of leadership through a socially constructed process, mainly focusing on leadership preparation and development for distinct contexts. There is a need to rethink the social dimension of leadership preparation and development to deepen the construction for the social process of leading effectively in education settings.

**Keywords:** leadership, deconstruction, development, preparation, social deconstruction

## 1. Introduction

In outlining what leadership really means, this chapter begins by looking at the concept differently. There is a need to understand the relationship between what leadership is and what it means. It is debatable whether leadership is for everyone, perhaps because people generally look for particular traits that entice them to follow their leaders [1]. This assumes that people always have a choice or say, in whoever ascends to the leadership position. Nevertheless, it is not always the case. What if they do not get to pick, but rather have to work under the leadership of a person who has been appointed into that position, particularly in a working environment? Either way, comprehending social process facilitating opinions influencing leadership provenance is essential, because leadership is a social occurrence [2, 3].

Jenkins [4] argues that people are not naturally inclined to be ruled and or led, because leadership is a construct designed to serve specific purpose/s such as maintaining inequalities. This possibly maintains a particular social order. The implication is that if people are not prone to be reigned as expected, and yet there is a need to have social order, those charged with a role to lead have need to exude a capacity to

influence conduct in achieving a specific purpose. In an educational context such as a school, the expectation is to have a well-run institution that inspires agreeable values instilled by a leader to achieve anticipated outcomes. For that reason, school leaders are charged with a responsibility to influence such desirable conduct. This assumes that these leaders have abilities or traits that enable achievement of these expectations [5], particularly in a socially demanding context. Which begs the questions; to what extent does the leadership role serve as a gatekeeping function? Why do leaders exist? What happens in a situation where there is no one assuming the leadership role?

We need to discern the purpose of leadership and leaders. In most instances, the two concepts are used interchangeably, yet there is a difference. First, the difference is outlined. Webb [2] makes a distinction that doing leadership activities does not translate into being a leader and thus offer an example that leadership is an ability to cast a vision whereas a leader is visionary. The purpose of leadership is to be a vanguard or hold a position and perform responsibilities [6]. To be a leader is to have transcendent authority [2]. Leaders are able to cultivate a culture that makes it possible for others to rally in unison around a particular common purpose because they employ influence [7]. What happens with a leader who is unable to inspire others? How can they be capacitated to lead through influence towards achieving desired outcomes, particularly in an extreme school setting?

Leadership exists because there is generally a belief that the buck needs to stop with someone. Schaeffer in [8] justify this by stating that “leadership is more than heavy handed at the top”. Allio in [7] is of the view that leadership is “elusive” because of the commanding forces that cannot be detected but keep acting on its process. Other authors view leadership as a conglomerate of leading personalities teaming up to lead and having a leader who directs this team [5, 7, 9–11]. In contrast, leaders have deep-rooted drive to achieve their purpose in a way that arouses others to follow them. They are efficient, whereas those in leadership are effective [2]. Therefore the assumption is that because this is the case, leaders can be able to hold others accountable and push them to achieve specified goals. Hence the push by leadership education conglomerates to design a curriculum or plan that enables attainment of the state of efficacy so that leaders can emerge to drive strategic objectives in a most cost effective way to maximise profit or achieve the highest possible outcomes to proof competence or success, particularly related to political gains or academic capitalism. Sometimes at the cost of social contract between leaders and those working under them. Therefore, leadership in this context is a construction building towards show of efficient leader’s practice [12]. This then backs the question, what do leaders need to do to achieve leadership objectives whilst engaging social process in educational spaces.

This question borders on the understanding that success in leadership requires intense continuous development of leaders and their identities, particularly in a schooling context.

## **2. Leading and leadership in education**

Sources about leading and leadership in education repeatedly point to the significance of leading successfully and detail ideal types of leadership for various reasons, stemming from habits and social phenomenon [13], socialisation and leader identity [14], leadership in extreme contexts [10] and values driven leadership for improvement of performance [15–17]. In order for us to probe the context of this purported success, we need to identify the constructs associated with this achievement. First, the conception of an individual/s holding the position has to be understood.

Coming to grips with the individual when leading and holding the lead position in an education space is important. Conceptualising the traits that drive action by the person of the leader marks their personal identity. A leader's persona marks his/her individual identity. Authors in [18] propose a deindividuation phenomenon to deepen understanding on the identity of a person (leaders in this context) and suggest that there are two possible states of being; primarily is an individuated leader in this context, acting in a coherent and judicious way; and then again there is a leader acting without limitations or thought because his/her individuality is submerged. The individuation process of a leader therefore signifies their purpose and role in leading the condition under which this role occurs within a social context [19]. Therefore the social context and factors could possibly be significant to determine the individuality operation of a leader. This is based on both empirical results and theoretical groundworks [5, 12]. The ostensible constructs include; the notion of influence and rational persuasion, the attributes of decisiveness and action, ability to collaborate, and appeal of the general behaviour due to charisma and transformative abilities [20]. The notion of leading as a dynamic contradictory and enigmatical construct is hereunder constructed through; the notion of influence and rational persuasion, the attributes of decisiveness and action, ability to collaborate grow appreciation and appeal of the general behaviour due to charisma and transformative abilities.

## **2.1 The notion of influence and rational persuasion**

A Leader is a person deemed to have the ability to influence juniors or followers [5]. Influence in its nature has elements of social interrelation. This could disputably be because influence is a positive or negative shared social phenomenon affecting conduct. Influence is said to be a social phenomenon refers to people's understandings regarding others' values, beliefs and mannerism's inspiration on their behaviour and decisions [21]. Once people are inspired, they become persuaded and are inclined to follow what inspires them wilfully.

Leaders need to have the capacity to influence and inspire others so that they are persuaded to listen and comply with requirements they set out. Once people are persuaded, they may attach value and believe in what the leader require and or expect from them, which in turn, may inspire compliance, particularly in achieving desired results. Compliance refers to a response and urges influencing action or conduct in a desirable manner [22]. Usually this happens to foster wilful conformity. Leaders who manage to attain intentional compliance generally exude capacity to influence through rational persuasion and are arguably decisive in taking action to achieve this.

## **2.2 The attributes of decisiveness and action**

A leader is generally considered an individual who can shape the social and or cultural context under which s/he operates. There is nothing like the best set of attributes or style of an ideal leader for all conditions [23]. However, decisiveness is conceivably an essential ingredient in whatever attributes a leader exude. Equally, a leader's role is feasibly action oriented. Even though leaders are responsible to get things done and achieve requisite outputs, their influence cannot be cohesive if their focus is only intended at accomplishing objectives, rather than being aware of socially constructed practices that they can conceivably employ to produce positive action [24]. A school leader for instance, needs to be aware of the proverbial social issues—ranging from hardcore negative attitudes to subtle tendencies of racism and ethnicity—threatening progress in their institution, and come up with realistic

strategies to eradicate these matters. Conceivably, such decisiveness and action are desirable qualities for assuming purposefulness in the role of leading. In such instances, continuous support and development of leaders is required to sharpen their skills, enhance their ability to lead and recognise the socio-cultural factors of influence that can improve and advance their role to lead by taking necessary action [25].

Putting plans to action require taking critical decision making and preparations. There has to be consultations, collaborations formed and agreements for the successful execution of plans, particularly in schools that require performance improvement [26]. It is important to consider the proximity of relations between leaders and those working under them in considering successful actualization of plans. The psycho-social distance can influence the sort of actions leaders in organisations take and its members [10]. It is important to understand the deeper drive constituting the conceptualization of traits needed by a leader in influencing practices through collaboration and informed actions.

### **2.3 Ability to collaborate and grow appreciation**

The education sector in general and schooling system in particular within South Africa, needs leaders who are able to find a way to weave together a substantial effort, determination and rally people to achieve desired outcomes. A school leader needs to have the ability to entwine collaborative ideas and encourage participation by all stakeholders in the school if they desire to enjoy support and create a conducive social participation [27]. Sharing and allocating responsibilities among teachers and other parties involved in the running of the school is important to achieve collegiality and should include encouraging collective reflection and decision making [28].

For collective decision making and creativity to take place, there should be a concerted effort to improve the morale and tackle social snags when they crop up without bias [27]. This necessitates continuous development of leaders to enable them to come up with initiatives that will feed into collaborative activities. During this process, leaders need to appreciate efforts through the show of gratitude. Building shared creativities and amassing the necessary support demands conscious continuous development of leaders [29]. Leaders need constant support and development to keep up with the changing demands of their positions and enhance their transformative prowess particularly in schools. In turn, they can cope with what confronts them as they lead, mainly when confronted with issues that relates to collaboration, social cohesion and taking action.

### **2.4 Appeal of the general behaviour due to charisma and transformative abilities**

The ability to build-up collective effort can practicably, directly lend itself to having a capacity to change perceptions and encourage will to transform. School leaders need to have the capacity to maintain social relations and cultural considerations in bringing together all parties with an intent to shape conduct and transform practices to achieve institutional goals [30]. The argument furnished [31] is that even though leaders are believed to have influence, little is said about the manner and extent to which such influence have to shape actions. This could have an element of bias because there is no clear framework guiding such actions. For that reason, putting emphasis on the notion of influence and appeal may inadvertently cause tendencies that resist transformation [8].

The measure of succeeding in providing inspiration necessitates charting programmes of development for leaders, specifically focusing on honing abilities that enable leaders to adjust and embrace changing terrains, often caused by unintended occurrences. The argument furnished is that leaders in schools do not necessarily have capacity to inspire transformative practices in the absence of clearly articulated standards for school leaders' qualification [32]. Backing the assertion that leaders' mission is to advance a particular purpose, often related to achieving interests of other powers elsewhere as discussed in the introduction. Hence the push for prescriptive qualifications to entrench that which seeks to evoke an appeal of a conduct inspiring charisma and transformative abilities [32]. This includes the shift from knowing what to do, to doing what needs to be done, regardless of the context.

### **3. Leading and leadership development within socially demanding contexts**

Leaders are expected to lead within all contexts, specifically those that demand prowess of their abilities. Demanding contexts require a leader who is able to accede to the trying environments and deal with difficult or extreme incidences as they occur. Hence the need to develop them. The need to help leaders apply what they learn to their context is confirmed [5]. However it is important to highlight that what is learned should add to the understanding of varied modalities of tackling problems so that leaders are empowered to initiate their own ways of resolving issues within their situations, which may not necessarily be the same as other circumstances or contexts.

Often what is learnt is hardly practiced, which suggests that what is taught may not necessarily be relevant to what leaders need to know and be able to use when devising ways to address issues in demanding contexts [33]. Difficult contexts arguably require leaders who are decisive and can act swiftly or deal with whatever issues cropping up at any given time, within their practice. The three components when leading within challenging contexts found to be significant are; dealing with problems directly related to the school context, being people-centered by adopting the values that prioritise people over the organisation, and promoting collaboration and moral purpose [34]. The preceding discussions expose the key considerations when planning for leaders' development; content provisioning should be personalised, socialised, adaptive and context based for leaders.

#### **3.1 Personalised provisioning to build capacity**

Leaders in difficult contexts need to be social change agents. However, there are no two contexts that have the same difficulties. Hence it is essential for trainers and providers to structure development programs for leaders in a manner that equip them with skills that can enable them to deal with issues as they crop up and themselves be able to build capacity or organise capacity building for all stakeholders in their institutions.

There is a need for provisioning of dependable support for school leaders to accede to the demands of changes in education, effectiveness and improved quality of education, and so that they can develop and shape the direction of their schools [25]. The capacity development is vital for improving knowledge and skills, particularly intending to attain co-operation and develop a culture of quality performance [35]. Personalising such provisioning according to the needs of the leader can possibly have immediate and direct impact on their practice and provide them with skills to promote collaboration.

### **3.2 Socialising practice to promote collaboration**

Leaders in schools have to understand their role and its impact on practices within their contexts. This includes contributing towards social values and educational ethics; having competency in critical skills and knowledge set that is fundamental for accomplishing the demands of their role successfully; and possessing the professional attributes that can enable them to succeed in leading others collaboratively [25]. Learning to push for social practice in order to promote collaboration is crucial and ought to form part of the school leaders' development plan.

Without the understanding of collective practice, and the extent to which such practice can help transform and or improve performance, school leaders may struggle to enjoy the support of all stakeholders and run their institutions through a shared process. Leading a successful school does not rest on the leader alone, but relatively on a collective responsibility that nurtures leading collaboratively [35]. To make this process bearable, it is essential for leaders to distribute their process of leading in a manner that fuses an element of democracy, without losing sight and grip of the purpose for which such process is meant. This implies embarking in a collaborative way of accomplishing goals that can be done by considering all inputs and collectively deciding on the best solution.

Coherence, unity and shared focus on agreeable deliverables allow for power sharing and common understanding of institutional goals [36]. The role of leaders in this instance is to guide the process towards achieving agreeable results. Thus, shared values, can be used as a scaffolding to bridge such significant social process [15]. Scaffolding the process of leading makes others want to emulate their leaders while complying and carrying out duties as well as responsibilities because they understand the importance of working together for a common purpose. This requires properly planned provisioning for leaders, that supports development of self and others.

### **3.3 Planning leaders' development provisioning that is adaptive**

The prosperity of any institution rests on the leaders' ability to support development of others and being dedicated to pursue own professional development [37]. This requires knowledge of: the manner in which performance management is associated with planned improvement and continuous development; approaches linked to skilled development and adult learning; the promotion, implementing and encouragement of collaborative leadership; and the importance of Ubuntu inspired leadership [25].

Leaders are expected to demonstrate their headship through the implementation of planning processes, show of equity and fairness, and encouraging participation by initiating collaborative activities particularly in socially demanding contexts [37]. However, Ahn warns of the possibility of resistance, particularly when there is suspicions favouritism or the practice of the "Russian Doll" phenomenon, a process seen to be superficial and favouring the leaders' picks [8]. The majority of demanding contexts are thwart with such practices among others [35]. It is therefore important to plan for leadership development programme for school leaders that will particularly enable them to act prudently.

The Chinese use two social values termed Confucianism and Guanxi. Confucianism based on hierarchy and relating, where leaders with more resources and power are highly regarded and honoured than leaders having lesser means and power [38]. Guanxi is an element of confuciation in which emphasis is on personal connections, more of "whom you know is more important than what you know" [38]. This has a potential to negate all good intentions the leader has to form

successful collaborations, particularly if it is not understood by all involved and is not explained. Consequently, amassing skills to navigate such processes successfully is important, particularly in an attempt to re-write the narrative about leading differently and re-looking the social construction of leading, particularly in socially challenging contexts.

### **3.4 Context centered leadership development**

There is a need to explore the extent to which successful leaders are able to react and adjust to various contexts [5]. Deeper appreciation of the mechanisms and ontology of leadership practices and impact resides with all those charged with the responsibility of leading specifically, and those they lead in general. Understanding how leaders adapt and respond to varied contexts warrants considering different approaches successful leaders employ. It is a process that overall, necessitates a coordinated collective working collaboratively and be aware of their context [39] Hence the necessity to provide development suitable for such leaders' needs.

Leadership in recent times, is considered a team practice [5]. The art of influencing collective effort, when leading to a point where stakeholders consider themselves partners within the terrain of leading has a potential to heighten collaborative intent. Carsten and Uhl-Bien in [39] found in their research that followers see themselves as associates in the process of leadership and as a result are productive, hence they work better and desire to achieve more. Therefore development of leaders in contexts where leaders are embraced and stakeholders consider themselves leaders in their own right, ought to strengthen these acts of goodwill by equipping leaders towards leveraging on such practices in their course to create space for leading collaboratively and influencing practices.

#### *3.4.1 Influencing practices*

Sometimes, initiating activities and or programmes that are unpopular and not favoured may prove problematic, particularly in challenging contexts. This is where the application of social values such as guanxi may be useful to garner necessary support towards having a ripple effect of diffusing action that influence the embracing of change and different ways of doing things. There is nothing wrong with leaders having a core that help them overcome institutional cultural obstacles in their attempt to influence conduct and effect necessary change [39].

In developing own relations when leading, it is essential to make it clear that the covert dyadic ties established to have someone or a core representing people a leader can rely on, should be based on work and ensuring that full support of the leaders' initiative ignite influence of others. A core in this instance resembles a relationship between a leader and nucleus members forming the chromosome group from which action launch. This core comprises trustworthy individuals who have bought into the vision and are willing to roll-up their sleeves to get work done. They agree to be sent on a high authority mission requiring fearlessness and awareness of the task at hand with mutual trust intact and are a de facto link to the leaders' office because of their social attributes [40]. The individual or core in such instances are entrusted with a responsibility to be an expanded influence cohort. Such initiatives should be context based and meant for a specific social course [41]. Leaders need to be prepared towards developing such core if they are to make headway concerning achievement of goals, particularly in difficult contexts.

The critical operative value of the core is founded on trust. Trust forms the bedrock for institutions and is arguably essential to build strong relations for effective collaborative social action. It is essential for achieving the potential collective

benefits of scale and scope and should extend beyond personal and individual relations to mutual trust [42]. The operative principles at play in this instance are openness, transparency, trust (as a value) and authenticity to achieve bilateral, institutional, and relational trust. Bilateral trust is based on fairness, stability created, and predictable collective routines established based on the institutional norms, whereas institutional trust is founded on processes, principles and norms within the organisation [43]. Relational trust happens when all parties demonstrate a willpower to work hard towards achieving goals [44]. When power dynamics are uneven, it is essential for school leaders to specifically, be the key drivers of trust [43]. Once trust is established, leaders in socially distinct contexts (particularly in socially demanding education contexts) can influence practices and build teams.

#### **4. Leading and leadership within socially distinct contexts**

Leading occurs in various social contexts among of which are schools. Schools operate in vast social contexts influenced by socio-economic, techno-cultural and religious factors. The vastness of these social factors directly has a bearing on the quality of leading and leadership as well as the school functionality. Excellence in leadership at various levels of the institution is connected to the attitude of its employees, performance, climate and the conduciveness of the environment [45] as well as existential factors. Leaders are expected to ensure that what needs to happen, happens with the involvement of all concerned stakeholders. However, context and social elements matter and mainly influence the extent of leading and leadership success. This is because the functionality of leaders is determined by the characteristics of both the leaders and followers [12].

In general, context matters and thus the social dynamics at play and the leadership, serve as the best abettors regarding the institutions' state of functionality. The relationship between the leader and followers has a direct bearing to the prevailing conduct and functionality of the school [12]. Based on such relationship, the elements at play are socially constructed and define the context. Contexts vary from excellent performance and functional to difficult and underperformance. Excellence and functionality can be juxtaposed to favourable social conditions and contexts whereas underperformance and extreme contexts may be placed alongside unfavourable social situations.

##### **4.1 Contexts of excellence**

One of the key factors found to be foremost in leading excellent contexts is the ability of leaders "to get things done by working with and through people" [46], regardless of the socio-cultural conditions within their setting. They seem not deterred by the circumstances and factors often attributed to the reasons of underperformance in other institutions. The question is, what makes institutions, particularly those operating in extreme contexts excel? For any institution to succeed, there is a need for stakeholders to pursue greatness, in turn they need skilled leaders that can create enabling working conditions [15]. Institutional excellence can be summarised according to the following abilities:

- Encouraging self-regulated interaction and support among members of staff
- Inspiring a vision and following-up by modelling a way to achieve the vision
- Involving stakeholders in decision making processes and clarifying the reasons for taking such decisions and acting on them

- Striving to build strong teams and aggravating collaborative action.
- Creating a safe and conducive environment where everyone feels free to perform
- Inspiring values that guide conduct and practices
- Have authority to act decisively, take crucial decisions and embark in courageous conversations [12, 15, 45, 46].

When planning a context based development program for school leaders, it is important for service providers to consider designing the provision of their programmes in line with the aforementioned abilities to graduate leaders that are able to succeed in their contexts.

#### **4.2 Extreme contexts**

Leading in extreme contexts largely remain a path for deeper exploration. Contexts that are extreme can be categorised as environments that exist under difficult conditions and are mostly characterised by chaos [11], intolerable circumstances [10], underperforming contexts [15, 16] and challenging contexts [9, 35]. In all these situations, the contexts are fraught with negative social issues that, to a great extent, contribute to the situation. Often these extenuating circumstances are arguably propelled by subtle forces that manage to somewhat spread a wave of negative atmosphere. Because education spaces were sites of contesting for alternative kind of society [11] and perhaps social order in fighting the apartheid regime in South Africa, most stakeholders in these spaces, particularly in extreme contexts have not unlearned resistant attitudes and related conduct. Hence the chaotic and underperformance challenges continue to be, among others, prevalent. Problems in all these situations are said to be traceable back to policy processes and documents inclusive of the national development plan (NDP) (Kriel in [11]).

In light of the above, the circumstances under which leaders in these contexts' work is discouraging. Resulting into low level of motivation and inability to account for occurrences and poor performance in their institutions [16]. They often have a sense of powerlessness and are not able to turn their situation and performance around [9]. Apparently intensifying the performance agreement of leaders can enable the correct improvement because such agreements are linked to development [16]. Sadly most of such performance agreements in these contexts are said to be superficial [11], implying that whatever development scheduled from such outcomes, may equally not address the real areas for development for these leaders. Consequently, leaders' practices and school context in this instance are symbiotic. Getting the leaders' act right through targeted development programme and improving practices can possibly help turn the situation of their institution around and enable a suitably constructed social order within such spaces.

Leading within distinct contexts require concerted effort to disrupt the patterns and attitudes that perpetuate disorder by intently focusing on developing leaders in such institutions to act decisively and change the prevailing narrative. Zeichner in [11] argues that restructuring of these sites to be more collaborative and professional is linked with social problems such as contradictions and tensions. Therefore, there is a need for leaders in such contexts to disempower these social challenges and assume authority. Achieving this colossal intention, necessitates a development of judicious and *socially structured process of leading and learning change methods*. This chapter proposes the following, to construct such social process:

- Leaders' development programme featuring self-directed electives that provides for needs specific content, to help participants enrolled in such programmes to acquire skills that can enable them to transform or maintain good practices in their institutions.
- Onsite learning programme that offers opportunities for leaders to implement what they learn and intently inspire the will to learn and improve.
- Considering the values inspired by confucian and guanxi practices, leaders need to make a concerted effort towards formulating a problem based collaborative collective core, based on practices that focus on the needs, limitations and opportunities within working spaces to disrupt the scourge of social problems and turn around practices. However, they should be mindful that others are not side-lined in the process, but rather graduated to other specific collaborative cores intended at addressing various social problems.
- Periodic reviews should be planned for reporting and to allow for critical reflection of collective progress and effectiveness of formed collaborations.
- Institutional collective agreement of tackling issues of competency, conduct and performance to increase ownership in addition to inspiring and strengthening the values of responsibility, responsiveness, Ubuntu and compassion.
- Leaders need to develop a personality ethic that is informed by sowing the seeds of greatness to shape their character ethic.
- Showing gratitude to strides made in achieving goals and striving for success.

The above directly respond to the department of basic educations' (DBE) strategic priorities in response to the realisation of schooling 2030 action plan in South Africa [25].

## **5. Conclusion**

The chapter provided a distinction between leadership and leading in varied social contexts. Leading is considered a dynamic contradictory and enigmatical construct constructed through; the notion of influence and rational persuasion, the attributes of decisiveness and action, ability to collaborate, growing appreciation and appeal of the general behaviour due to charisma and transformative abilities. The chapter further submits that leading and leadership development within socially demanding contexts require socialising practice to promote collaboration. Further, it is important to plan for leaders' development provisioning so that it is adaptive and context centered. Such leadership provisioning is important to influence development and improve practices. Development of leadership provisioning needs to further equip leaders with skills and abilities to lead within socially distinct context, particularly in schools. Finally, the chapter proposes considerations for constructing a social process for leaders to assume authority and have a voice to lead decisively inspired by shared values. Future studies could probe possible issues getting between the leaders and their success.

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