

# Leadership: A Systems Thinking Perspective

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**Abstract** Accepting new paradigms are important to advancing scientific knowledge. Over the history of humanity, discoveries have been made because of the availability of new facts that would be either previously impossible or improbable for multiple reasons. However, whenever one contextualizes the importance of leadership within the contemporary period of existence, one would find it difficult to diminish its contribution. Leadership makes or breaks organizations. Therefore, every facets of leadership should be scrutinized carefully; styles, types, reasons, and rewards, so that effective leadership can be appropriately placed and applied. Such broad perspectives may require further assistance because of missing links or incomprehensible relationships. If such is the case, one may require broadening one's horizon by examining existing facts in new ways. The foregoing is a scrutiny of the broader perspectives of paradigms and situating leadership appropriately within that massive scientific discourse.

**Keywords** Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Paradigms, Scientific Revolution, Contemporary Leadership, Systems Thinking, Leadership Skills

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of *paradigm* introduced by Thomas S. Kuhn in his seminal work *the structure of scientific revolutions*[7] gave substantial meaning to changing and transitioning moments of scientific knowledge. Kuhn[7] posited that *normal science* tend to gather knowledge in particular schools of thoughts and often reject basic innovations because they may act contrary to proven or acceptable allegiance or loyalty. Kuhn[7] opined that such suppression of scientific discoveries cannot be sustained however because sooner than later the novelty will rise to the fore. Kuhn[7] proffered that this process of accepting new discoveries is a *scientific revolution* in creating new paradigms or ways of thinking and doing.

The context above is a framework for which I will endeavor to situate leadership as a systems thinking paradigm through transitioning form the broader Kuhn's paradigm perspective to a focused leadership paradigm perspective as knowledge advance from one stage or epoch to another.

I therefore proffer that relevant leadership within the prevailing situations and circumstances must be a concentrated focus that emerges from the broader perspectives of Kuhn's paradigm transitioning through the contemporary reality of modernity and the need for transformational leadership.

## 2. Scientific Revolutions

According to Kuhn[7], science advance by alternating between "normal" and "revolutionary" phases. The author opined that when a revolutionary phase occurs, it does not necessarily imply that there is radical and accelerated progress; instead it simply means a qualitative difference between itself and normal science. Whereas normal science accumulates over time, revolutionary science revise existing scientific ways of doing and believing[7]. Kuhn[7] noted that both normal and revolutionary science progress although not necessarily cumulatively. Therefore, the imperative for this paper, as Kuhn explains, is not so much about the distinction between contexts of discovery and justification, instead its about the divergence between the standard picture and the context of justification.

Contemporary paradigm for example, is a transitioning of paradigms from classical to neo-classical to contemporary. Docherty, Surles, and Donovan[6] argued that the classical model with its machine metaphor focused on mass production and therefore its hierarchy of authority is centered at the top because individuals were never a focus under such paradigm. Docherty et al.,[6] noted that there is a narrow span of control with this paradigm.

Transitioning continued with an attempt to refine contemporary paradigm or to correct its flaws that were inconsistent with modern organizations but are inherent to the paradigm. Neo-classical paradigm was the response. Asopa and Beye[2] noted that neo-classical theory is informal, recognizing individuals' uniqueness and group

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synergies. Individuals became the center of focus under neo-classical theory[6].

The culminating contemporary theory is the most revolutionary along the transitioning line of organizational theory and practice[6]. Docherty et al.,[6] opined that in comparison to the foregoing two paradigms, contemporary paradigm examines a number of issues that have arisen in the previous paradigms such as *division of labor, human factors*, and the effect of *information and communications technology (ICT)* on organizational theory.

Scott and Davis[10] approximate the arguments of the previous writers by advancing their rational, natural, and open systems perspectives. The authors reasoned that individuals and groups might influence organizations in different ways. Scott and Davis[10] opined that the organization is subjected to the influence of power and status and therefore personality and performance may be affected. The authors posited that this sociological impingement weighs heavily on communication, decision-making, and socialization. An understanding of their combined effect upon organizational practice is therefore essential to the contemporary manager. However, other conditionality and circumstances affect contemporary management and decision-making such as the leadership skills required to match organizational theories within a given situatedness of people, machines, and the prevailing environment. I will address some of these issues in the proceeding paragraphs.

### 3. Leadership Skills

Having a grasp of the organizational climate in which one is operating, the next step is to appropriately match the knowledge and skill-sets necessary to run a successful business. It is therefore incumbent upon leaders to have an understanding of their leadership roles and responsibilities. Leadership is itself a scientific revolution evolving from *born leaders* according to the *great man theory* to *transformational leaders*[11] and a plethora of styles in between. Leadership transitioned from born leaders to leaders having special characteristics called *traits*. Traits are unique and distinguishing features that are lacking in followers[11]. The evolution continued with the recognition that certain environmental factors are important to leaders when making decisions. These *Situational* factors “pays special attention to contextual factors: the nature of the work performed by the leader’s unit, the individual characteristics of the followers, or the nature of the external environment”[5].

Building upon situational leadership, Fred Fielder posited that although it is important to note the situational circumstances a leader faced, those situations are highly influenced by the state of being or prevailing facts, the degree or accuracy of advanced knowledge, and the power or influence the leader brings to the situation[11]. These new acknowledgements gave rise to *contingency* leadership.

Burns, more concerned with distinguishing leaders from

managers proposed that leaders and followers achieve their objectives when there is mutual respect and cooperation between them in his seminal work on the *transforming leader*[4]. In adjusting the term “transforming” to *transactional*, and by extension, slightly changing its meaning, Laohavichien, Fredendall, and Cantrell[8] noted that transactional leader “produce incremental change” (p. 8).

These leadership paradigms however reached their pinnacle when Baas introduced the concept of the *transformational leader*. Laohavichien et al.,[8] opined that the transformational leader is essential for creating “radical change” (p. 8). The transformational leader is a requirement for contemporary management because such a leader produces “entrepreneurial champions, organizational champions, and champions of radical military innovations” [11, p. 105]. Transformational leadership is therefore a necessary tool to engage followers in analyzing, interpreting, deciding, and taking actions in these modern and post-modern times.

## 4. Leadership Paradigm

The preceding paragraphs clearly identify and outline the necessity for contemporary leaders to understand the multiple paradigms of contemporary times and to fuse the knowledge and skill-sets gleaned from these multiple perspectives if leadership is to be successful within an environment of constant change. A leader understanding the concept of paradigms as proffered by Kuhn, meandering through and extracting the necessary characteristics of scientific revolutions that occurred in organizational theories, and comprehending the historical and contextual contributions of modern and post-modern management principles will equip himself or herself to approach leadership in a comprehensive way that will render success in decisions and actions. A pictorial of the arguments presented follows.

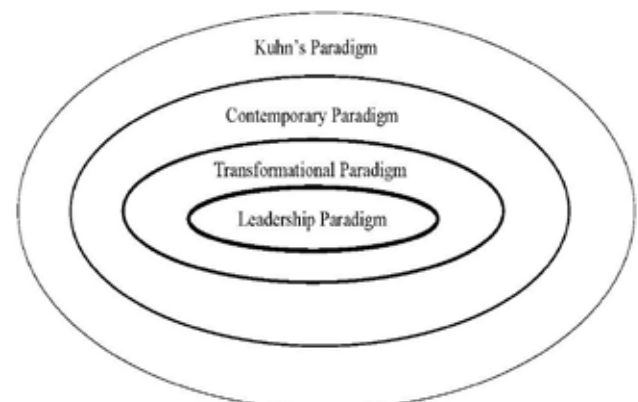


Figure 1. Leadership: A Systems Thinking Perspective

## 5. Leadership Systems Thinking Paradigm

As one moves inward on Figure 1 above, the broadest perspective of understanding scientific revolutions is Kuhn's paradigm theory. "Kuhn's Paradigm" has the thinnest line because environmental factors are not as limiting for transitioning forward and for adhering to a specific leadership paradigm. Leaders must start with a comprehensive understanding of their extensive responsibilities from both perspectives of normal and revolutionary science. The next level "Contemporary Paradigm" brings Kuhn's theory of paradigms into focus, limiting the area of discovery to a specific field or discipline. One would therefore notice an increase in the sharpness of the line over the level at Kuhn's Paradigm. At this second level, decisions are specific to a particular discipline but broad enough to encourage and appreciate divergent perspectives within a specific domain. Goertzen [12] posited that the contemporary period requires transforming leaders because of the elevated effect such governance and guidance brings to both leaders and followers. Goertzen [12] argued that appropriately placing transforming leaders within the prevailing situation and circumstances will raise the conduct and interaction of interconnected parties and each member share his or her moral values, goals, principles, and motives.

The third level of the diagram recognizes that having understood organizational theory within the context of a contemporary world from the second level, leaders will likely endeavour to match organizational theory and practice with an appropriate leadership model. One can observe this strengthening in the diagram toward strong leadership as one notices the increased boldness of the line as one proceeds toward the ultimate leadership paradigm. At the "Transformational Paradigm" level, effective leaders will hone in their management principles and practices toward effective, appropriate, and relevant decisions and actions as both the internal and external environment increase in focus. At the transformational paradigm level, decision-making is hinged on the organization's strategic fit and purpose for organizational existence and performance. Goertzen [12] noted that transformational leadership "focuses more on attaining practical organizational objectives" (p. 84). Yukl [as cited in 13] reckoned that transformational leadership is about "transforming the values and priorities of followers and motivating them to perform beyond their expectations" (p. 69). Contemporary times require honest, frank, and timely communication among stakeholders and transformational leadership is ideally situated to accomplish such mission [14].

The diagram culminates at the center where "Leadership Paradigm" emphasizes the roles to lead, manage, and control decisions, performance, and output that will meet and improve organizations' expectations. Leaders must recognize that they are managing in a changing world influenced by the strong presence of technology coexisting with humans and co-constituting the means and ends to productive endeavors. They must also recognize the imperative of getting directives right the first time. The line signifying organizational boundaries is strongest and most

pronounced at this level because the greatest responsibilities of a leader is to the enterprise and its staff. In this regard, the transformational leader is capable of building commitment, enthusiasm, and leveraging cultural heterogeneity [12]. In contemporary organizations in which followers expect equal participation, engagement, trust, mutual respect, responsibility, and authority, the transformational leader would seem the most appropriate to effect appropriate leadership. The diagram above should assist such a leader in transitioning through his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities effectively, honestly, and suitably.

## 6. Ethical Implications

According to Argandoña [1], a leader's action should incorporate three fundamental criteria (1) competence, (2) necessity, and (3) coherency and reliability. These characteristics are important to making effective ethical decisions. Lacking abilities in any of these three areas can prove devastating to organizations. Nekoranec [9] opined that it was because of deficiencies in ethical principles that the recent financial crisis occurred. "Ethics is not a management tool, but a criterion for evaluating reality" [1, p. 439]. Therefore, if leaders were more ethical in their actions and behavior, the financial crisis may have been averted. Transformational leaders are suitably qualified because of their honesty, frankness, and timeliness in bringing stakeholders together and for their outlook in advancing their organizations.

## 7. Paradigm Perspective

Baltzan and Phillips [3] proffered that contemporary organizations need bold radical and disruptive decisions to achieve their strategic objectives. Such examples can be seen in Amazon.com and eBay's approach to fusing technology and personnel for achieving competitive advantage in the marketplace. The approach of these organizations has changed the very nature of businesses within the book industry and the auctioning industry respectively. A similar understanding aided by the diagram above engenders the phenomenological consequence, especially of information and communications technology and its relationship on contemporary business demands and practices. This perspective is therefore relevant to modern organizations operating in a climate of constant change and to the leaders of such enterprises for effective management and control.

## 8. Conclusions

As the diagram above portrays, an understanding of the broad perspectives of multiple disciplines will equip leaders to make more relevant and timely decisions suitable for the prevailing circumstances within the given situatedness of leaders, managers, workers, and other stakeholders. Leaders

who grasp the respective organizational theories and who equally comprehend the various leadership paradigms and management roles will likely make appropriate decisions that will allow their organizations to operate as successful going concerns.

Equally, businesses operating successfully will contribute to their environment, will build the life of their employees, owners, and stakeholders, and will help to develop their local and global economies. A comprehension of both organizational and leadership paradigms are therefore essential for contemporary leaders as they face the challenges of an ever changing environment and as they grapple with the need to survive.

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