Leadership is a nebulous word with countless definitions. The results of effective leadership are easily recognized, yet, despite its many definitions, leadership itself remains difficult to define. In his book Leadership Jazz, author and CEO Max Dupree says, “One examines leadership beginning not with techniques but rather with premises, not with tools but with beliefs, and not with systems but with understandings.” (Wren 453) The way we study and define leadership has evolved through all of human history to the premises, beliefs and understandings of today’s culture. The way we think about leadership has paralleled changes in worldview and is now charting confusing and contradictory territory, employing concepts of quantum, chaos and string theories. For each worldview there is a complimentary leadership theory, which differs—sometimes slightly and sometimes more strenuously—from preceding theories. By looking at philosophies of leadership over time, similarities and differences can be defined through the lens of worldview. A brief definition of Ancient, Modern, Postmodern and Convergent worldviews will set the stage for each of the major trends in leadership theory.

How Leadership Looked Through the Ancient Worldview

The ancient worldview revolved around gods or a god, literally. Time was measured in cycles of life. The sun counted out a day, the seasons cycled year-in and year-out and each generation emerged from the last to produce the next. Knowledge came from oral traditions. Stories were about divine control in the world and leaders as an extension of the divine—gods themselves. In Millennium Matrix, Rex Miller describes that an ancient leader’s authority came from “…an outside source, the power of the original source of delegation or control—divine, delegated, hereditary, or raw force.” (Miller 110) Authority, not yet called “leadership,” was a matter of predestination. All of life was seen as being controlled by something outside—something bigger and more powerful. Some leaders were born into the right family, or were appointed by an established authority. Leaders in this time were believed to be different from the people who followed.

The Great Man Theory

The Great Man theory encompasses the idea of a leader being born and not made—of a hero giving protection from the unseen forces of nature and of the gods. An “Ableman” as Carlyle puts it, “…the truest hearted, justest, the Noblest Man: what he tells us to do must be the wisest, fittest…the thing which it will in all ways will behove us…” (Wren 54) Although the Great Man Theory is attributed to Carlyle, the ideas of influential thinkers, predating him, support Carlyle’s philosophy. According to Plato, this able man is just the one to govern, and he must be wise. In the 6th century BCE, Lao-tzu wrote, the enlightened leader must “place the well-being of all above the well-being of self alone.” (Wren 69) This man was the hero we longed for, and even if he didn’t have the advantage, in body, of a god, Aristotle still considered intelligence to be a requirement of an effective governor. (Wren 65-66) Machiavelli goes even further to say if being good and smart isn’t enough a Prince must know how and be willing to use force. (Wren 67) Machiavelli still assumes that the leader knows what’s best for the people and that means justify ends.

As worldview changed from Ancient to Modern, our view of leadership changed. Knowledge about leadership had only to be observed and studied to gain understanding. Newton and his theories about the behavior of matter are associated with the Enlightenment, which ushered in the Modern era. Belief in the measurability of the laws of the universe, led a quest for control over nature and superstition. The thinkers of the Enlightenment thought knowledge could create a utopian world for all of humanity.
How Leadership Looked Through the Modern Worldview

The Enlightenment officially started with the peace of Westphalia in 1648. A century earlier the foundation had been laid in the form of the Renaissance—a French word, meaning rebirth or revival. Renaissance thinkers elevated humankind to the center of reality, developed the scientific method, and saw the downfall of the empire of the Roman Catholic Church. Francis Bacon thought with enough knowledge, we could control our environment and make it better for humans. He foresaw the interrelation of the sciences and thinkers that came after him sought to control human behavior—not just physical circumstances. (Grenz 57-59) Philosophers like Descartes, Newton, and Kant believed that Knowledge is certain, objective, and good. A rational, dispassionate self can obtain such knowledge. The knowing self peers at the mechanistic world as a neutral observer, armed with the scientific method. The knower engages in the knowing process believing that knowledge leads to progress and that science coupled with education will free mankind from our vulnerability to nature and all forms of social bondage. (Grenz 81)

Through the modern lens, leadership was viewed not only as involving inherent traits, but also in the ability to control followers, which furthered the enlightenment project. Organizations could be managed if the traits of leadership were discovered and understood. In the quest to control human behavior the scientific method was applied to the art (or science) of leadership. Modern theorists thought of an organization as a machine, in which a person was no more individual or valuable than a cog. Scientific approaches to social organization, like division of labor and specialization, greatly influenced the study of leadership.

The Trait Theory

Research of Trait Theory began around 1910. “The ‘trait theory’ of leadership ascribes certain personality traits or attributes exclusively to leaders,” writes Cheryl Mabey in The Making of the Citizen Leader. (Wren 311) Theorists wanted to know what specific physical traits and personal characteristics belonged to a leader? What made a leader different from a follower? After more than 30 years of study it was determined that there was no pattern in the physical, or inherited, traits of leaders. However, different leadership situations called for different leadership traits.

In 1948, Ralph Stogdill published an article in The Journal of Psychology, entitled Personal Factors Associated with Leadership. He begins by acknowledging the surveys of Smith and Krueger up to 1933, and those efforts of W.O. Jenkins, who studied leadership traits under military conditions in 1947. In Stogdill’s own research, which involved non-military leaders, he found that the only factors consistently associated with leadership were characteristics such as capacity, achievement, responsibility, participation, and status. This was significant because it defined the leader in terms of the dynamic environment of the follower. (Wren 129-130) In 1948, German sociologist, Max Weber, prophetically sounded the bureaucratic alarm in his Essays in Sociology. Weber saw not only the big, organizational picture, but he also wrote about charismatic leadership. In Leaders and Followers, John Gardner quotes Weber’s assertion that this type of leader appears in stressful or changing times. Again, this ties leadership characteristics to situation, and not only that, but the “state of mind of the follower” is brought into the equation for the first time. (Wren 185)

Trait Theory vs. the Great Man

Trait theory was similar to Great Man theory because they both attributed the success of the leader to something about the leader. A great man was still required to be a successful leader—a man who was seen to be different from his followers, who was capable of leadership because of his traits, whether personal or physical.

Trait theory digresses from the Great Man theory in how the leader acquires his traits. The great or noble or able man was simply born that way to be a leader. Trait theorists discovered common personality characteristics among leaders, the capabilities for which were still inherent, but didn’t guarantee the exercise of leadership. Another difference between Trait Theory and the Great Man Theory was the discovery that in successful leadership, certain traits were connected to certain environments. A specific personality characteristic worked better in one situation than another. A situation, like change or crisis, could demand
a leader with complementary characteristics.

As Weber predicted, we didn’t like the “iron cage” of bureaucracy that we constructed for ourselves. (Wren 298) Bureaucracy was like a wearing a straight jacket for both leadership and organizations. Leadership theory was progressing from being solely about the leader to incorporating the importance of the follower. Modern revolutions in physics and philosophy jarred theorists into a new and uncertain realm of relationship between the leader and the follower.

How Leadership Looks
Through the Postmodern Worldview

Postmodernity is a rejection of the Enlightenment project. Skeptical that truth can be found through rationality, or that one objective version of truth exists, postmoderns no longer believe in human ability to acquire knowledge that accurately defines reality. Instead, there are as many versions of reality as there are people. Everything is relative depending on the point from which it is observed. The discoveries of Einstein and Heisenberg toppled the Newtonian machine. Postmodernity “signifies the change from an industrial society—symbolized by the factory, to an information society—symbolized by the computer.” (Grenz 17) The focus of leadership is shifting away from control to the interaction between the leader and the led. Understanding depends on the idea that nothing is as knowable as it was in the Newtonian, machine-view of the world. “The leader’s authority stems from the ability to meaningfully connect to the constituency. The leader’s focus is on harnessing the potential of the organization by rallying constituents around central principles, a mission or a theme, and creating an identity…” (Miller 110)

Behavioral Theory

The study of Behavioral theory began in the 1950’s. The approach was still somewhat Modern, because theorists believed they could discover specific behaviors and teach those to potential leaders. McGregor’s Theory X assumed a view of the worker as a cog in the industrial machine. Workers were treated as if they were lazy and unwilling to work, instead of desirous of a meaningful experience and willing to cooperate with the goals of the company. His Theory Y says that people want to do a good job—that they aren’t part of a predictable machine. McGregor theorized a leader’s view of his followers determines how he treats them. In the 1970’s, Fielder’s Contingency Theory separated the behaviors of leaders into either a task or a relational orientation, using the situation to determine which type of leader was more effective. Around the same time, Hersey and Blanchard proposed in their Contingency Theory. Leaders had to be able to adapt and employ either task or relational behaviors, as the situation required. The state of the followers and the environment became a new element in the leadership equation. Behavioral theory mirrors postmodern concepts of relativity, because there is no longer a best or objective way to lead. Leadership now depends on not only the traits and behavior of the leader, but on the followers, the situation, and the environment. House’s Path-Goal Theory, in 1971, seems to regress to a Modern framework—still trying to discover the best behaviors for the followers and attempting to control follower behavior with incentives. Vroom, Yetton and Jago’s, Leader Participation Theory, is still heavy on technique but engages the followers at a much higher level by determining their capability and willingness to take on responsibility.

The study of leadership and organizational structure became more prolific as bureaucracy and the Newtonian machine showed signs of wear. Sociologists and psychologists joined scientists and engineers in finding better ways to lead organizations. “Theory X and Theory Y are theories of human motivation developed by Douglas McGregor at the MIT Sloan School of Management in the 1960s that have been used in human resource management, organizational behavior, and organizational development.” (Wikipedia) In Fred Fiedler’s work, The Theory of Leadership Effectiveness, he believed both the situation and the personality of the leader were important. He developed the Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) scale to measure relational and task motivation. Later he studied situational control based on trust, task structure and authority. His work has since been highly criticized and contested. Hersey & Blanchard worked in the late 60’s proposing their Situational Leadership Model, which added a third dimension, willingness and ability of the follower, to measure leadership effectiveness. Robert House’s 1971 Path-Goal Theory is about motivating followers, showing them the best
way to the goal, and getting the obstacles out of the way. In 1973 Vroom, Yetton and Jago published Leadership and Decision Making, which introduced a grid to assess decision-making styles in a leadership situation.

Behavior Theory vs. Trait Theory

Behavioral theories, like Trait theories, place importance on the characteristics and abilities of the leader. The difference is that Behavior theory includes the follower. This makes every leadership situation slightly different, and depending on the situation, task behavior, relationship behavior, or a combination of the two can be applied. This shows a shift away from the scientific approach, because the changing factors of the environment determine how best to lead. Theories at this time are concerned with the motivations, willingness, and preferences of the worker, as well as how the traits of the leader match the situation.

How Leadership Looks

Through the Convergent Worldview

Futurist Rex Miller, has spent many years studying social change through the lens of communications. He predicts another change in worldview around the year 2010. (Miller 96) This change concurs with discoveries, mainly in physics, but also in chemistry and biology, the three of which are becoming harder to separate. Miller refers to the next worldview as “Convergent” or “Bohmian,”— a worldview about relationships, where everything is connected to everything else. Things like ecosystems and subatomic particles are now viewed in terms of systems and patterns rather than as autonomous. We are beginning to understand that changing even the slightest detail might affect the whole system. Quantum mechanics and chaos theory are changing the way we see our world. The very act of observation changes what we observe. We are beginning to seek out complex patterns, rather than a simplistic cause and effect. People want leaders who create community, a context for meaning and purposeful work. (Miller 108-111) The most recent theories in leadership address these issues and blaze new trails into what it means to both lead and to follow.

Process Theory

Process theories have arisen in the past 25 years to answer the changing culture. Leadership is moving from merely including the follower, to treating the leader and the follower as interdependent. Leadership and followership both consider collective goals as more important than individual goals. In 1978, political scientist and historian, George MacGregor Burns introduced the concept of Transformational Leadership in his book Leadership, asserting a common good higher than simply seeing to individual wants and needs. The end measure is the well being of the people involved in the process. He recounts some of his experiences and observations about leadership during his service to President Johnson, and believes “That people can be lifted into their better selves...” by transformational leadership. (Burns 462) Servant, Relational, Social Change, and Theory Z leadership theories are also concerned with quality of life and the leaders’ role in facilitating that quality. Discoveries in physics have caused some theorists, like Margaret Wheatley to begin looking at leadership in light of quantum mechanics, chaos, and systems. Most recently, a study by Jim Collins revealed what he calls Level 5 Leadership, which is concerned with the character and motivation of the leader—again, for the well being of all concerned in the process. In the foreword to Robert Greenleaf’s 1977 Servant Leadership, Steven Covey says, “A low trust culture that is characterized by high-control management, political posturing, protectionism, cynicism, and internal competition and adversarialism simply cannot compete with the speed, quality, and innovation of those organizations around the world that do empower people,” (Greenleaf 2). The Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA developed the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, in 1996, to build strong students who make a difference in their institution and community. Two years later, Susan Komives says in her 1998 book, Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference “The leadership process is not about things—it is about people.” (Komives 1) Another process-oriented approach came from William Ochi in 1981. A professor at the Graduate School of Management at UCLA, the same organization affiliated with the Social Change Model of Leadership, Ouchi answered the X and Y theories with Theory Z: How American Management Can Meet the Japanese Challenge. Ouchi asserts that without trust, intimacy, and subtlety we can’t compete in the global market.
He suggests that we look at this Japanese style of leadership, which is concerned with how employers treat employees, and apply it usefully in the United States. More recently, Margaret Wheatley examines the connections between current scientific theories and leadership in her 1999 book, Leadership and the New Science. Wheatley believes we ought to look at leadership through the lens of quantum physics and chaos theory to understand how organizations really work, reducing control and increasing relationships. Good to Great, published in 2001, contains the results of a study by Jim Collins and his team of why some companies are just good, as opposed to great. As much as they tried to steer clear of the “leadership” answer, the evidence pointed to great leaders and their combination of humility and personal will.

Behavioral Theory vs. Process Theory

Relationship is important to both Behavioral and Process theories. Both theories focus on the importance of the follower and the interaction between the leader and follower. Process theory has elevated the role of follower, even going so far as to place the leader in a servant—or facilitator position—relative to his or her followers. The move toward less control and more trust on the part of the leader, attends to the well being, and even betterment, of all involved. Attention to collective goals, social justice, and sustainability are common threads in all of the Process theories, mirroring the desire of younger generations to reclaim a sense of community and connectedness. This is an exciting time to study leadership theory because of the discoveries in science and the resulting changes.

Works Cited


