Adaptive Leadership: Leading and Following

Key Concept
This new approach sees leadership as a socially complex and ‘adaptive’ process that is not constrained by traditional hierarchies and is thus very suited to modern progressive ways of working. Recurring patterns of leading and following interactions produce emergent leader-follower identities, relationships and social structures, which enables groups to evolve dynamically. This ‘adaptive leadership theory’ offers a basis for re-examining traditional theories that focus instead on, for example, individualistic or hierarchical views of leadership.

Idea Summary
Much of the recent research into leadership seems to note the same thing: current leadership theories are lacking something, or limiting in their conceptualization. Elaborating on this, the author of this paper introduces a new theory, based on the idea that leadership consists of a series of recurring leading-following double interacts that anyone can participate in. The process, he says, is more of a dynamic and fluid one, rather than simply involving people as just leaders or followers.

This ‘adaptive leadership theory’ visualizes leadership as a process that is not constrained by hierarchical, one-directional, individualistic or de-contextualized notions of leadership. Focusing on leadership in group settings only, the author’s model is based on five core propositions:

1. The basic unit of interaction in the leadership process is a series of leading-following double interacts that take on distinct patterns of interaction over time.
2. These double interacts stimulate the construction of leader and follower identities, which becomes the basis for leader-follower relationships in groups.
3. The emergent patterns of leading-following interactions develops within an environment and context that are endogenous, not exogenous, to the leading-following process.
4. The leading-following process is fluid such that actors can be leading and/or following at different point in time, and this interactional process produces and re-produces distinct patterns of leader-follower relationships in groups.
5. Finally, a group’s ability to adapt in dynamic contexts is a function of how much variability exists in the pattern of leader-follower identities and relationships.

These propositions are discussed in this paper in detail. The author also suggests that the leadership process may not begin with an act of leading, as proposed by most leadership theories; instead, according to him, acts of leading might be a response to another actor’s earlier acts of following.

Looking at leadership in this way (i.e. as a complex adaptive process) brings attention to the social complexities and emergent properties of leadership in contemporary organizations.

Business Application
At the heart of the adaptive leadership theory is the notion that individuals defined as leaders and other individuals defined as followers essentially make up the leadership process, thus comprising complex adaptive process shifts. According to the author, individuals that want to create relationships that become the basis for group-level leadership structures (i.e. centralized, distributed, shared, void) have to co-construct leading-following relationships.

However, he also recognizes the functional benefits of hierarchy and structure, particularly acknowledging their
influence on emergent leading-following interactions. But the form of that hierarchy should be flexible enough to allow individuals to take on identities as leaders and/or followers, and vary the patterns of leading-following interactions. This will also allow the act of leading to take on multiple directions.

The author goes on to detail the areas in which his work highlights further research is needed, including trait and behavioural theories of leadership. In this way, rather than provide a definitive model, the author’s idea expressed through this paper constitutes more of a foundation for stimulating and encouraging discussion on how leadership is defined, providing an opportunity to extend existing theories on leadership.

**Further Reading**

**Further Relevant Resources**
- D. Scott DeRue’s profile at the Ross School of Business
- D. Scott DeRue’s personal website
- Ross School of Business’ profile at IEDP

**Authors**
DeRue, D. Scott

**Institutions**
- University of Michigan Ross School of Business

**Source**
- Research in Organizational Behaviour

**Idea Conceived**
2011

**Idea posted**
January 2013

**DOI number**
10.13007/066

**Subject**
- Corporate Culture
- Leadership
- Management Theories