

PRESENTATION

Leadership: revisiting and reframing the big questions on theory and practice

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Abstract

This presentation is an introduction to the special issue of Cadernos EBAPE.BR on leadership. In response to recent calls for more rigorous leadership scholarship, the editors of this issue aim to showcase studies that take a novel approach to assessing the leadership processes. The articles selected demonstrate originality in terms of conceptual framing, methodology, and implications for theory and practice. The collection of four studies, three selected and one invited, allows readers to explore various topics and points of view. Overall, the articles approach leadership as a phenomenon that is not yet fully understood but can be explored from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. The editors of this issue also present their assessment of the state of leadership research in Brazil and offer suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: Leadership. Research methods. Management. Theory development.

Liderança: revisitando e reformulando as grandes questões da teoria e da prática

Resumo

Esta apresentação é uma introdução à edição especial do Cadernos EBAPE.BR sobre liderança. Em resposta aos recentes apelos por estudos de liderança mais rigorosos, os editores desta edição pretendem apresentar estudos que adotem uma abordagem inovadora para avaliar os processos de liderança. Os artigos selecionados demonstram originalidade em termos de enquadramento conceitual, metodologia e implicações para a teoria e a prática. O conjunto de quatro estudos, três selecionados e um convidado, permite ao leitor explorar diversos temas e pontos de vista. De modo geral, os artigos abordam a liderança como um fenômeno que ainda não é totalmente compreendido, mas que pode ser explorado a partir de múltiplas perspectivas teóricas e metodológicas. Os editores desta edição também apresentam sua avaliação sobre o estado da pesquisa sobre liderança no Brasil e oferecem sugestões para estudos futuros.

Palavras-chave: Liderança. Métodos de pesquisa. Gerenciamento. Desenvolvimento de teoria.

Liderazgo: revisando y reformulando las grandes cuestiones de la teoría y la práctica

Resumen

Esta presentación es una introducción a la edición especial de Cadernos EBAPE.BR sobre liderazgo. En respuesta a la reciente demanda de estudios de liderazgo más rigurosos, los editores de este número pretenden presentar estudios que adopten un enfoque innovador para evaluar los procesos de liderazgo. Los artículos seleccionados demuestran originalidad en términos de marco conceptual, metodología e implicaciones para la teoría y la práctica. El conjunto de cuatro estudios, tres seleccionados y uno invitado, permite al lector explorar diferentes temas y puntos de vista. En general, los artículos abordan el liderazgo como un fenómeno que aún no se comprende del todo, pero que puede explorarse desde múltiples perspectivas teóricas y metodológicas. Los editores de esta edición también presentan su evaluación del estado de la investigación sobre liderazgo en Brasil y ofrecen sugerencias para estudios futuros.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo. Métodos de investigación. Gestión. Desarrollo de teoría.

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INTRODUCTION

This special issue emerges from a call for papers that aimed at putting the spotlight on the contributions to the theoretical and empirical development of the field of leadership in Brazil. Our main goal was to draw attention to how the theory and practice of leadership can contribute to a better understanding of leadership processes and its elements (including antecedents, consequences, mechanisms, or singularities), and how they can impact the outcomes of leaders and followers, relationships between them, teams, as well as the organizational context. Moreover, we sought to encourage submissions that would explore the abovementioned themes through the lens of new theoretical perspectives and methods, different from those commonly adopted by the majority of research community (i.e., leaders' behaviors and styles, and cross-sectional research designs; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010).

Although the advances in the last 30 years have contributed to strengthening the leadership field and widening its scope in connection with practice, several challenges arise with the development of these new perspectives (Carton, 2022; Day, Riggio, Tan, & Conger, 2021; Gardner et al., 2020). For instance, new paradigms, theories, and views on leadership have been developed, moving the focus of leadership studies away from the figure of the leader (traits, styles, and behaviours) towards a more dynamic, relational, shared phenomenon, which encompasses different leadership mechanisms and loci (Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, & Johnson, 2011). However, most studies still evolve around limited conceptualizations of the phenomenon (Carton, 2022) and their results are often of limited relevance to organizational practice.

Regarding the leadership research in Brazil, a recent literature review has shed light on several areas that require improvement (Santos, Porto, & Borges-Andrade, 2021). The analysis of fifty-two articles published between 1996 and 2018 exposed a lack of clarity in the definitions of leadership and highlighted the low theoretical contribution of these articles, with authors deeming many of them to be "atheoretical." The authors also emphasize the need to strengthen methodological rigor and better integrate the national production with foreign literature.

In reviewing, editing, and compiling the papers submitted for this special issue, we have noticed new perspectives and topics presented in the three accepted manuscripts and one invited paper. Each of the papers accepted for publication takes a fundamentally different approach to assessing the leadership process, showing significant originality in terms of conceptual framing, methodology and implications for theory and practice. In doing so, they each respond to our calls to adopt levels of analysis that go 'beyond the leader' and 'reflect or go beyond mainstream leadership research', by developing research of 'relevance to organizational practice'. In this editorial, we hope to set the scene for the discussions on the state of art of leadership research in Brazil by briefly introducing each of the papers and highlighting opportunities for future avenues of research, with special attention to the research methodology. In engaging with this special issue, we encourage you to read widely and reflect deeply to see and understand leadership in new ways.

SELECTED PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The four papers selected for this special issue investigate novel leadership topics, setting a base for further research. What these papers have in common is an effort to concentrate on subjects that have been given short shrift to date. To begin, the invited paper authored by Birgit Schyns, Iris K. Gauglitz, Marlies Veestraeten (*in memoriam*), Steffen Nestler, and Annabel-Mauve Bonnefous considers the context of the first work experience of interns in order to explore how professional relationships unfold. The paper entitled "When does charm turn sour in early career working relationships? The relationship between narcissism and leader-member and member-member exchange" connects the dark side of personality to vocational behaviour by examining the role of narcissism in early-career relationship development at work. The authors build on research showing that narcissists can make a good first impression by being charming and extrovert, but they are viewed negatively over time, especially in the group context. The authors test a three-way interaction model using data from interns who were rated in terms of their relationship qualities by their supervisors (leader-member exchange, LMX) and their colleagues (member-member exchange, MMX). The results highlight both the need to conduct research that considers the negative consequences of leadership, as well as their longitudinal effects on leader-follower relationships.

The second paper authored by Vicente Reis Medeiros, Caroline Capaverde, Ana Clarissa Matte Zanardo dos Santos, and Éder Henriqson presents phenomenology as an epistemic alternative that complements and overcomes some of the limitations of mainstream approaches in the study of leadership. The authors argue that leadership studies have been heavily influenced by a heroic view of the leader, functionalism, objectivism, and a separation between the subject and object of research. The authors provide a critical narrative review of the main leadership theories, exploring their contradictions and limitations. They then introduce the reader to the concepts of phenomenology and explain how it can contribute to leadership research. According to the authors, phenomenology emphasizes the absence of presuppositions and encourages critical investigation, free from *a priori* expectations. That is, it focuses on examining reality as it appears to us in our subjective experience, rather than trying to objectively confirm theoretical perspectives or the researcher's beliefs of what leadership should be.

Embracing the notion of paradox – contradictory yet interrelated elements that consistently coexist – the paper entitled “Under pressure: how leaders react to identity threats related to their Paradoxical Leadership,” by Bruno Felix and João Santana, examines how individuals with a paradoxical leadership identity respond to identity threats. The authors conducted interviews with 44 leaders from a Brazilian credit cooperative, who had different working experiences and came from various organizational levels. They found that there are five anticipatory coping responses that leaders might adopt when they feel their identity is threatened. These coping mechanisms include “abandoning the identity,” “defending the identity,” “discrediting threats,” “changing the meaning of the identity,” and “relativizing the relevance of the threat.”

Finally, in the contribution from Kelly Guarnier and Paula Chimenti, the authors review 93 studies on neuroleadership to propose a new approach to leadership and further advance this promising research topic. As such, this work addresses two important questions outlined in the call for papers for the current special issue. First, the authors demonstrate how insights from neurosciences can contribute to the understanding of how and to what extent leaders can be trained and effectively perform their role. Second, the authors put forward examples of the use of neuroscience tools in differentiating between various leadership behaviours and styles and/or integrating them.

FUTURE STEPS

What has become apparent from the review of the articles in our current special issue is that Brazilian scholars can produce contributions that can significantly advance the leadership field. At the same time, there are still advances to be made in terms of research topics and methodological approaches that could enable an even greater impact of leadership research conducted in Brazil. We discuss some of them below.

First, the recent COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on organizations and their leaders, who must now face new challenges such as flexible work arrangements (Malhotra, 2021) and changing job-related attitudes evidenced by certain social trends such as “quiet quitting” or “act your wage” (Stillman, 2023). Recent work indicates that leadership in the virtual context requires different skills than leading in person (Bell, McAlpine, & Hill, 2023) and that culture may determine which leadership behaviors are more effective in the remote context (Zheng, Nieberle, Braun, & Schyns, 2023). Future research could explore what Brazilian employees expect from leaders in virtual and hybrid modes and how these expectations compare to those existing in other cultures. In addition, future studies could also consider how leaders can effectively engage in sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) such that they could positively influence employees' perceptions of meaningfulness of daily tasks (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004) and organizational support (Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011).

Another area in which Brazilian scholars could further contribute to the ongoing debate is the issue of leader and follower well-being (LePine, Zhang, Crawford, & Rich, 2016; Xi, He, Fehr, & Zhao, 2022). Significantly affected by organizational and societal changes (Leigh & Melwani, 2022), as well as complexity, uncertainty, and use of technology (Bauwens, Denissen, Van Beurden, & Coun, 2021), both leaders and followers can experience depletion of resources, which can not only result in lower individual performance (Bakker, Van Emmerik, & Van Riet, 2008) but also in unethical or abusive behaviors (Mackey, Ellen, McAllister, & Alexander, 2021). Future research could explore coping strategies (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) that protect leader and follower well-being not only during critical events but also when work demands are novel or high.

Moreover, our age of digitalization, uncertainty and disruptions has substantially changed labor relations and demands less directive, hierarchical and more collaborative organizational arrangements (Sobral & Furtado, 2019). As such, the so-called “post-heroic leadership”, focused on sharedness, collective achievement, teamwork, and shared accountability, has emerged as a new leadership paradigm (Fletcher, 2004). Post-heroic leadership theories portray leadership as a less individualistic phenomenon, dependent on the heroic actions of a single individual, instead embracing a more relational, humble, and shared process of influence, in which power can be distributed among participants (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2007). As argued by several authors, the post-heroic approach to leadership requires a leader who displays ‘relational skills and emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, empathy, vulnerability, an openness to learning from others regardless of their positional authority, and the ability to operate within more fluid power dynamics, reenvisioning the very notion of power from “power over” to “power within”’ (Fletcher, 2004, p. 650). Therefore, future research should examine the process and manifestations of post-heroic leadership.

This line of inquiry might be particularly interesting in Brazil, which has been considered a culture characterized by high power distance (Cavazotte, Hartman, & Bahiense, 2014). In such cultures, centralization tends to be a common feature of organizations, and subordinates are less encouraged to take initiative and be an active part of the leadership process. In this scenario, exploring how to reconcile a post-heroic leadership style with individuals’ expectations of heroic leaders would be a fruitful area of future research. For example, how are post-heroic leaders perceived by Brazilian workers? Do the positive outcomes of post-heroic leadership approaches, well-documented in the literature (e.g., Zhu, Liao, Yam, & Johnson, 2018), remain strong and significant in cultures like Brazil where leadership usually represents an asymmetric relationship, and leaders are expected to exert a heroic power-over role (i.e., power-over ideology)?

Furthermore, enhancing methodological rigor is imperative to improve the overall quality of the research conducted in Brazil. One way to do so is by carefully designing studies that allow the researcher to make causal claims regarding the studied relationships, for example experiments (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). In their recent review, P. M. Podsakoff and N. P. Podsakoff (2019) differentiate between three types of experimental design, which differ in terms of the degree of external and internal validity: laboratory experiment, field experiment, and quasi-experiment. While laboratory experiments offer the possibility of random assignment of participants to experimental conditions and a high degree of control over the experimental environment, the field experiment has the advantage of greater realism and lower demand effects (P. M. Podsakoff & N. P. Podsakoff, 2019). In any case, if scholars wish to choose any of the above-mentioned designs, they should follow the latest recommendations regarding this methodology, such as using objective behavioral measures whenever possible (Fischer, Hambrick, Sajons, & Van Quaquebeke, 2020), complementing the results from experimental studies with those from other qualitative and quantitative research approaches (P. M. Podsakoff & N. P. Podsakoff, 2019), and applying manipulation checks (Lonati, Quiroga, Zehnder, & Antonakis, 2018).

It is worth mentioning that an increased adoption of experimental design is partially related to a growing concern and substantial doubt regarding questionnaire-based survey research. While experimental studies do not overcome all methodological and conceptual concerns involved in survey research, which include sampling, measurement, and analysis issues, there are ways to make survey data collection more compelling for theory testing. Therefore, Brazilian studies should adhere to best practices and general recommendations regarding research into questionnaire design (see Lietz, 2010).

For example, questionnaire responses may suffer from what researchers call “low-quality data,” which may take the form of insufficient effort or deceptive (fake or intentionally dishonest) responses (DeSimone & Harms, 2018). To mitigate this issue, Brazilian researchers can insert different types of items (e.g., bogus or instructed items) into a questionnaire to determine whether respondents are devoting sufficient effort to the study. Another possibility to mitigate endogeneity issues and common method bias when using questionnaires is the utilization of longitudinal designs and panel data analysis, which helps rule out alternative hypotheses and allows for more robust causal conclusions (Wooldridge, 2010).

In addition, the advancement of leadership field may require new methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative (Bryman, 2004; E. Lanka, S. Lanka, Rostron, & Singh, 2020). In leadership research, what we commonly see is research method preferences guiding the development of research questions rather than the other way around, which would be expected (Van Knippenberg, 2023). Such dominance of method-based perspective seems self-sustaining, both because people are more likely to rely on the method, they are more familiar with and because it creates an implicit norm as to what appropriate methods and research questions are. This, however, may constrain new avenues for research questions that guide the development of new theories (including difficult to assess or controversial topics) and hinder the exploration of new and unknown management

phenomena (E. Lanka et al., 2020). Thus, since leadership is a social influence process, qualitative research may help to theorize about the nature of these processes and overcome the weaknesses of other research methodologies. It is about conducting rigorous qualitative analysis of good qualitative data, therefore complementing, and supplementing our understanding of leadership, integrating the wide range of interrelated variables which make up what we know as leadership.

CONCLUSION

When selecting the contributions for this special issue, we sought studies that went beyond the traditional focus on the leader and considered contextual and processual contingencies influencing the leadership process. Our aim was to include studies that provided alternative perspectives to mainstream leadership research, showcasing diverse and innovative approaches that have the potential to advance the literature. Therefore, by selecting these particular contributions, we aimed to emphasize their significant and differential impact on the field of leadership research.

Moreover, when preparing this editorial, we took an opportunity to briefly comment on the leadership research that is currently being developed in Brazil and the need to conduct rigorous studies with direct relevance to organizational practice. We also suggested future steps for developing research that is more impactful. Although we have not discussed these points at length, we believe that it is not only possible but also appropriate for scholars to reflect on them further in order to promote the evolution of the field.

By engaging in the preparation of this special issue, we, as editors, seek to advance research on leadership despite the caveats associated with conducting and evaluating it. We believe that robust and meaningful research is more than just a scientific production for a closed group of experts, but that it can contribute towards improving individual and societal conditions in Brazil and worldwide.

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