



Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service

## Exploring Leadership for Public Wellbeing: New Vistas for Understanding and Fostering Leadership

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In a world characterized by schisms and discontinuities, there appears to be agreement around the need for shared responsibility in tackling the intractable problems that prevent all human beings from attaining their right to a good life. In these complex times, characterized by high degrees of uncertainty, no adequate solution can come from a single group or from one charismatic individual alone. Instead, robust solutions emerge from multiple actors located across the larger system they constitute, engaging together in negotiated efforts to find the vision, the collective will and sustained action to transform imagined possibilities into desired results. This reality calls for a form of leadership that differs from that offered by the heroic individual who enlists followers to achieve his or her pre-determined vision of change.

We present leadership for public wellbeing as a countercultural frame that offers a model of leadership more appropriate for today's collective demands and responsibilities. It is countercultural because it is located in collective as much as in individual action, is premised on horizontal as well as vertical power, and is concerned with the common good rather than the interests of a few. Despite many examples of this form of leadership across the world, much of popular and scholarly leadership understandings remain locked in the largely outdated individual model.

In this paper we review understandings of leadership and invite you to explore their resonance in your own contexts. Such leadership understanding mainly emanate from a leadership discipline that has formed over the past fifty years in North America and Europe. This discipline is comprised mainly of scholarship and leadership development programs, with the latter based mainly on ideas circulated through scholarship. We discuss limitations of the dominant understandings of leadership as well as new exciting directions in scholarship. Leadership for public wellbeing is then presented as a context which holds promise for opening up the leadership field in ways that suggest new possibilities for practice and action, shifting the focus from the *who* to the *how* of leadership, and pointing to the multiple leadership roles people can take at different levels and positions in their community of practice. We outline various frameworks that have contributed to articulating leadership for public wellbeing. Based on our understanding of leadership for public wellbeing and the opportunities it presents, we share our aspirations for the convening, presenting a few questions for our collective inquiry and opportunities for our collective action around leadership development, curriculum design and leadership research.

## **Dominant Understandings of Leadership**

Our conceptual understandings of leadership have started to change, with increased acceptance that leadership can be distributed among many and can happen in many places simultaneously. Nevertheless, when we think of leadership in practice, we tend to revert to traditional understandings based on dominant mental models of what it means to be a leader. Leadership for many still conjures images of a lone, heroic figure who through formal authority, can influence others to think and act in ways that accomplish his agenda. This heroic and often exclusive image of who can be a leader is constructed from narrow

experiences. It prevents many of us from recognizing, understanding and nurturing the diverse forms of leadership that abound in communities around the world.

When considering leadership in organizational and formal group contexts, there are remnants of the 'industrial' model in this way of thinking about leadership. The industrial model of leadership took shape from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reflects the assumptions and mindsets of this era at its peak. According to this model, leadership is a rational activity focusing on formal techniques of social intervention. It is regarded as a means to an end and is enacted through personalized relationships taking place in a hierarchical context. In this mode of thinking, leadership is primarily represented by male figures, reflecting male values, characteristics and orientations<sup>1</sup>.

Much leadership discourse has remained locked into this traditional paradigm which views organizations as predictable machines made up of inputs and outputs with strong leaders at the apex controlling a set of linear processes<sup>2</sup>. In turn much scholarship has tried to understand leadership by focusing on individual traits, styles, activities or situational factors that impact the effectiveness of an influential person in a position of authority<sup>3</sup>. Many studies are premised on leadership being an influence relationship between leaders and followers, in which individuals of certain characteristics can make things happen in a fairly unidirectional and linear way.

Thinking about leadership as a property of individuals enacted in the leader-follower relation has three main implications.

*A focus on the 'who' and 'what' of leadership:*

Because leadership has traditionally been thought of as innate, the focus of leadership studies has been on the 'who' of leadership (who is a leader and what are his/her characteristics?) and the 'what' of leadership (what do leaders do?). We know less about *how* leadership is practiced and *how* change happens through leadership. As a result, we know very little about the conditions that can help create environments where people feel encouraged to enact their leadership. But thinking about the *how* of leadership requires understanding leadership as a practice that is carried out in relationship rather than as a natural ability held by a few talented individuals. The *how* of leadership points to the relational processes by which individuals find their sense of purpose to help advance a shared vision.

*Limited purviews:*

Enduring assumptions about where leadership lies greatly reduces the scope of what constitutes leadership<sup>4</sup>. Influenced by the heroic idea of leadership, researchers have tended to look for leadership where their mental models have conditioned them to find it. Scholars have looked for the 'usual suspects' mainly in political realms, in corporate cultures, and in highly structured hierarchical systems like the military, where leadership is assumed with a formal position of authority. In turn, narratives of leadership have included only a few voices and have tended to exclude contexts where power is more diffuse and

influence is not necessarily ‘top-down’ (between leaders and followers) but ‘in-between’ (between a group and a target)<sup>5</sup>. Given the increasing importance of the latter contexts, existing narratives offer little help to illuminate and guide those interested in engaging a broader set of actors in the solution of our collective problems.

Looking for leadership where it is expected, according to a limited set of assumptions, ends up confusing leadership with the leader<sup>6</sup>. The error is in assuming that the personal causation of an individual social actor can explain the complex and continuous nature of leadership. If leadership is a social process where multiple conditions and actors influence each other<sup>7</sup>, then exclusive attention to the visible leader of that process offers only a partial understanding of the overall reality of leadership. So far this attention has resulted in good insights about the *who* of leadership but fewer insights about the *how* of it.

*Reduced relevance in light of a new global reality:*

While the model of singular leadership probably worked well for highly controlled environments like industrial factories and centralized corporations, it is less in touch with our current global reality and more decentralized models of authority<sup>8</sup>, whether desired or actual. This new age is about an economy where knowledge is a core commodity and the rapid production of knowledge and innovation is critical to organizational survival. Intellectual capital, rather than physical capital, is what drives success.

This age has also been described as the age of participation, where ordinary citizens want and expect to contribute their voice at some point of either the production process or the decision-making chain<sup>9</sup>. Trends that attest to this include the surge in citizen media, mainstreaming of participatory design, and heightened demands for participatory governance.

Twenty-first century organizations are facing a complex competitive landscape driven by globalization and technological revolution. Scholars are increasingly drawing on complexity and systems theory, using lessons from nature to articulate the ordered randomness of our world and the new organizational dynamics that characterize it. In a complex environment, outcomes are less predictable, the relationship between cause and effect is non-linear, and there is a higher degree of indeterminism and lack of control. All of this heightens the need for interdependence and more flexible structures. While traditional bureaucracies exist, the structure of many organizations has shifted from the pyramid to the web, with more dispersed authority and responsibility throughout the organization. In this context, leadership is more needed than ever, yet no single leader can provide the necessary leadership to meet today’s complex challenges<sup>10</sup>. New leadership models that more appropriately reflect these shifts may help organizations working for public wellbeing reach the required levels of effectiveness and adaptability needed in today’s turbulent environment.

## **New Developments in the Field of Leadership**

New leadership scholarship invites us to think of leadership differently. A more ‘relational’ type of leadership is called for that helps create the conditions for organizational members to be able to engage in collaborative behavior and with more horizontal relations of accountability. Because diversity is more prevalent and due to a heightened need for interdependence, members of contemporary organizations are most likely to encounter and work with others who differ from them. Relational leadership, it is argued, helps foster bridges and strengthen bonds among stakeholders whose perspectives differ for a variety of reasons<sup>11 12</sup>.

Several leadership thinkers have begun to direct attention away from an exclusive focus on the “leader” to consider also the acts of leadership, leadership in process, and the public aspects of leadership work. Heifetz, for example, distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges, arguing that it is the latter that requires the work of leadership<sup>13</sup>. Technical problems are fairly predictable and solvable because they have established ways of responding. They do not require a fundamental change in assumptions, methods or tools. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, have no ready solution. Addressing them often requires a shift in assumptions or frameworks towards new learning, innovation and new patterns of behavior. It is such adaptive challenges – ostensibly intractable problems with no cookie-cutter solution - that warrant leadership.

More and more the leadership literature discusses leadership as a property of a group rather than an individual. Adjectives like distributed, shared, inclusive, connected and collective are used. Such labels point to a similar idea – that leadership is needed to address the adaptive challenges that groups or organizations face, and it happens by connecting individual wills to a larger purpose so that they agree to act jointly. Leadership is therefore a type of work that helps the group<sup>14</sup>:

- Find the direction it needs to move forward;
- Align group members’ separate and disparate actions towards a vision based on a common purpose;
- Develop and maintain commitment to each member and to the vision as obstacles get in the way of moving forward.

These new conceptualizations point to notable shifts in the field of leadership. More attention is now directed towards shared leadership and the collective meaning making processes that shape the experience of leadership and the practices that reflect these understandings. Another shift encourages looking at the traits or behaviors of individuals in the context of the tasks the group faces as it takes action. Thirdly, new leadership trends push the search for leadership in new places. These shifts build on several bodies of work that have contributed to developing the field of leadership and have influenced RCLA’s own work.

### *Transformational leadership*

Although more traditional in its focus on leaders and followers, transformational leadership theory<sup>15</sup> dramatically changed the field’s understanding of the leader-follower relationship

and the leadership influence process when it emerged as the leading leadership theory in the 1980's. In this view, as a long-term relationship, leadership raises both leader and followers to higher levels of motivation and morality and encourages the latter to assume leadership roles. Transformational leadership is characterized by the reciprocal learning relationship that produces the paradoxical idea that leaders best lead by being led<sup>16</sup>. One of the helpful ideas offered by this theory is that leadership can be as much about human development as meeting organizational objectives. The 'leadership for what' question begins to open up to include outcomes related to humane relationships, mutual learning, and serving the common good.

### *Collective and constructed leadership*

Many scholars share the idea that leadership has both individual and collective dimensions. This means that even though leadership is enacted through persons, the meanings that allow them and other members of the group to experience leadership reflect members' agreements about what counts as leadership. This way of thinking about leadership broadens attention from formal leaders and their influence on followers, to the relational processes that produce leadership in a group, organization or system.

Recent studies consider how leadership emerges in teams, suggesting that group and collective levels of action have a different quality and require different lenses to understand them<sup>17</sup>. Other work is interested in leadership that is distributed among several persons, like co-directorships, dual leadership structures and leadership by committee, to explore how this way of doing leadership is different from cases where it is concentrated in a single person. We refer to this as 'leadership as trend', where the actual form of leadership takes on a more collective and distributed quality.

Further exploring these premises, other scholars view leadership as the outcome of human social constructions emerging from the rich interdependencies of organizations and their members<sup>18</sup>. These studies explore how leadership emerges from *members* of a community of practice rather than exclusively from an appointed leader. Drath for instance argues that leadership *happens* when people in a community create a shared understanding of their mutual and moral obligations so that their common cause is realized<sup>19</sup>. Such work has helped rewrite leadership as a dynamic, multi-directional, collective activity - a social process more than a series of individual activities. Human interactions are key in views of leadership as a constructed process, which points to the importance given to leadership in and through relationships and networks of influence.

In these approaches the relationship between individual leaders and followers is viewed as embedded in a broader system of relationships where the meaning-making and organizing processes that are taking place to produce results help to define and constitute such relationships<sup>20</sup>. We refer to this as 'leadership as lens'. Thus even the most hierarchical of leadership settings is collective because it is the outcome of negotiated meaning that is constructed in action, over time. This lens shifts the focus of leadership research from individual relationships to meaning-making processes and practices that help a group find

its direction, adapt to challenges that appear in the way and ensure member commitment to move forward.

## **Leadership for Public Wellbeing: Offering New Possibilities for Understanding and Fostering Leadership**

Through our work we have noticed that all definitions of leadership – no matter how different they are – include the idea that leadership happens when there is a collective need to accomplish something, that is, a need for purposive action. But if we see leadership existing only when we see heroic individuals acting on the national stage we miss much of the leadership that exists – in communities, across fields, in teams, through collaboration. This is particularly problematic if we are interested in leadership that addresses the intractable problems that affect society, independent of whether this leadership emerges from the public, the private or the nonprofit sector.

The purposive action that galvanizes leadership for public wellbeing is driven by interests that transcend the narrow confines of an individual and his/her organization or community. A public-mission driven model of leadership addresses issues of social concern, such as youth unemployment, marginalization of women, or public healthcare. These issues are shared power problems that spill beyond the borders of any single organization or group. They require concerted, collective effort and adaptive responses<sup>21</sup>. In understanding how these society-wide challenges are addressed, in finding solutions that work in addressing them, it would be remiss to focus solely on the individual actors. More important is to view these actors in relation to the *work* of leadership, that is, the actual leadership practices that reflect shared assumptions and the group's agreements related to what they believe brings about positive change.

For illustration of how this new approach is yielding broader vistas of leadership we present below examples of different frameworks for thinking about and developing leadership. These frameworks have been created to illuminate and address leadership practices of groups working towards public wellbeing:

1. In our work we have developed a social change leadership framework<sup>22</sup>, based on seven years of participatory research that illuminates the elements of the 'work' of leadership at US social change organizations (SCOs)<sup>i</sup>. At the core of social change leadership are three types of leadership practices that are enacted both internally and externally to organizations and support meaning making that moves collective efforts forward. 'Reframing' practices serve to alter dominant conceptions and mental models that perpetuate injustice, while advancing new frames that are congruent with the vision SCOs

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<sup>i</sup> Social change organizations (SCOs) are small, grassroots, nonprofit organizations that serve marginalized and disadvantaged groups and do so in a systemic way that increases the power of these groups. They aspire to embody democratic values, pursue human dignity and citizenship, and work for the common good.

and their communities seek. ‘Bridging’ practices bring diverse actors together and facilitate their joint work, breaking the isolation and fragmentation that many individuals experience as a consequence of poverty and marginalization. ‘Unleashing’ practices help unleash human energies, creating the supportive environment that helps every member of the group reclaim their full humanity and recognize their inherent power to direct their lives. Our framework poses that these sets of *practices*, along with organizing *activities*, build *collective capacity* to leverage power for social change. Together, we call these dimensions “strategic action.” Strategic action is grounded in an integrated philosophy or worldview – which we call “grounded humanism” – that provides a powerful source of meaning. This worldview includes *leadership drivers* anchored in a set of *assumptions* and *core values* of social justice.

2. Applying the framework of “Leadership for the Common Good”<sup>23</sup> to a global context, Crosby<sup>24</sup> explores how two global organizations enacted leadership functions as they tried to build transnational communities. She uses their stories to document the main tasks of leadership in the global commons: understanding the social, political, economic and technological “givens”; understanding the people involved, including the self; building teams and nurturing effective and humane organizations, inter-organizational networks and communities; creating and communicating meaning in formal and informal forums; making and implementing policy decisions in formal and informal arenas; enforcing ethical principles, laws and norms and resolving residual conflicts in formal and informal courts; and coordinating leadership tasks in change cycles.

3. In the context of service-learning, Komives and her associates<sup>25</sup> have developed a social change model of leadership development that can be used to promote leadership among university students as they engage in service-learning activities. They describe the following key assumptions of their approach to leadership: leadership is concerned with producing change on behalf of others; it is collaborative; it is a process rather than a position; it is value-based; all students are potential leaders; and service is a powerful vehicle to develop leadership skills. The model poses that seven key values interact, as individuals groups and communities engage in social change activities. These are, at the group level, collaboration, common purpose and controversy with civility; at the community level, citizenship; and at the individual level, consciousness of self, congruence and commitment.

4. Social entrepreneurship offers yet another framework for conceptualizing leadership that acts for the common good. There have been a spectrum of perspectives on social entrepreneurship, with some defining it as a way to incorporate business practices and models in solving social issues and others advocating for market-based approaches to making social change. A helpful and more inclusive way for thinking about social entrepreneurship comes from the NYU-wide, yet Wagner-managed “Reynolds Program in

Social Entrepreneurship<sup>ii</sup>”. The program reflects the notion that social entrepreneurship is a meta-profession that draws on the skills and methodologies from a wide variety of disciplines and sector. It defines it as pattern breaking change to address intractable social problems in ways that are sustainable and scalable. Social entrepreneurship is understood as a transformative form of public leadership that maximizes the social return on public service efforts while fundamentally and permanently changing the way problems are addressed on a global scale. We feel that the social entrepreneurship and leadership conversations have remained largely disconnected. While social entrepreneurship is a helpful way for thinking about public-mission and values-driven work, new approaches in thinking about leadership can help nuance and deepen the social entrepreneurship conversation.

5. In the context of the Middle East there have been a number of efforts to advance a public-mission driven model of leadership. Johns Hopkins University in partnership with Save the Children set out to explore cases of emerging leadership driven by social inequities. Their work identifies the conditions that facilitate the sprouting of a different type of leadership, one premised on horizontal authority and dispersed relations of power<sup>26</sup>. Another example comes from Ruwwad, a non-profit based in Jordan working towards youth leadership and the empowerment of citizens within communities. Based on this experience, Ruwwad has put forth models of establishing strategic partnerships across the corporate, civil society and government sectors and demonstrated how these can create success in transformative social change for the Middle East<sup>27</sup>. The Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement based at the American University in Cairo offers yet another example of ‘field building’ through advancing a discourse that illuminates people’s active and collective commitment to achieving the common good for their society.

As these frameworks illustrate, leadership for public wellbeing can further open up our understanding of leadership because it transcends organizational boundaries or places organizational processes at the service of a vision of social vitality. It illuminates people’s active and collective commitment to achieving the common good for their society. To engage in this leadership is to recognize that people have rights to social participation and obligations to contribute to problem-solving in their communities<sup>28</sup>. It transforms ordinary citizens into active agents of change, and in doing so opens up new public spaces for deliberation and engagement.

Understanding leadership for public wellbeing is important because it is emblematic of our new global reality marked by uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change. We have established above that leadership conceptions need to adapt to match the times in which

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<sup>ii</sup> Established with a \$10 million grant, the NYU Reynolds Program in Social Entrepreneurship supports and trains the next generation of change makers. The program offers technical support and tuition assistance to NYU students at both the undergraduate and graduate level who are tackling society’s most intractable problems. See <http://www.nyu.edu/reynolds/social/index.flash.html> for more information.

we live. Better understanding the conditions that enable leadership for public wellbeing to emerge and flourish, as well as the relationships, practices, and processes that constitute it are critical for two reasons. First, by unpacking how and why this form of leadership takes place we can create strategies that help foster it, and hence contribute to the tackling of society's most wicked problems in a collaborative way. Second, by updating leadership discourse and expanding the notion of who can be a leader, we enable more people to see themselves reflected in the leadership that gets recognized and find their own way into leadership themselves.

Against the backdrop of an unprecedented global economic downturn it is inspiring to see that leadership for public wellbeing abounds in both the United States and in the Middle East. Because this leadership is premised on horizontal, rather than vertical authority, is geared towards human development and looks at leadership as an activity that can be exercised by any citizen from any walk of life, it has tended to fly under the radars of traditional scholarship and public discourse. This is unfortunate, given that there is much to learn about this form of leadership.

### **Opportunities: Supporting leadership for public wellbeing and building the Field of Leadership**

At a spring symposium we organized titled "social change organizations and public leadership" one of the participants made a simple, yet significant remark: leadership (according to the exciting new developments in the field) is about both process and purpose. Exploring leadership for public wellbeing holds potential for unpacking both process and purpose – dimensions which have been largely overlooked according to the traditional leadership paradigm.

We aspire, through convening in Abu Dhabi, to learn about the processes and practices of leadership – *how* leadership happens, and to remind and inspire ourselves and others of the importance of engaging in a public-mission model of leadership – *why* leadership happens. By exploring on-the-ground examples of leadership for public wellbeing in both the US and Middle East we hope to make some inroads into how and why leadership happens when the purpose is to address collective problems. This will form the inquiry strand of our convening through which we would like to explore questions such as:

- What are the current examples of leadership for public wellbeing in the region and in the US and what do these tell us about how leadership is practiced?
- Who engages in leadership for public wellbeing and how are the tasks and responsibilities of leadership distributed up, down, and across a social system?
- What is the nature of the human interactions and the social processes that make up leadership for public wellbeing?
- How does context matter to leadership for public wellbeing?
- What are the implications of the answers to these questions to advancing the leadership field through research and practice?

Our work at the Research Center for Leadership in Action is about connecting knowledge and action (or more accurately generating knowledge in action) and bridging the world of practice and the world of academia. We thus invite you to not only learn about how leadership happens but also to consider what it would take to see more leadership for public wellbeing in the world. This relates to the action strand of our convening where we hope to explore opportunities for supporting leadership for public wellbeing through our collective work and spheres of influence. Given our various institutional locations we conceived of three main realms to explore approaches for advancing leadership for public wellbeing. This is not to say that these are the only ways to support leadership – but rather these are three general ‘spaces’ through which action can be taken:

### *Scholarship*

Universities and other research institutions are important sites for knowledge generation and play pivotal roles in advancing discourse on leadership. Much of the dominant leadership models discussed above have been constructed through theoretical and empirical research from individual corporate and political leaders. Given the interest in widening leadership purviews to recognize, understand and nurture the diverse forms of leadership that abound in communities around the world, what are the questions that we can explore through research? And what are the sites of leadership action that need illumination?

### *Curricula*

It is often challenging to teach leadership at the undergraduate and graduate level without resorting solely to theoretical models of leadership. Many leadership courses end up teaching students *about* leadership rather than facilitating a process for students to locate themselves as leaders or to reflect on their experiences of leadership. Service learning programs are now mainstreamed in academic curricula across the U.S and the Middle East but they seldom apply a leadership lens. Through our conversation we are hoping to outline some principles that can help inform the development of student curricula around leadership.

### *Leadership Development Programs*

Whether engaging students, professionals, or community members, leadership development programs need to foster a different set of skills if they are to equip people to deal with complex social problems in this day and age. In our learning together, we hope to generate practical implications for the design of programs for both *leader* and *leadership* development. The new thinking on leadership in relational terms does not negate the importance of individual agency, but offers some suggestions for how individuals can partake in a collective model of leadership. *Leader* development programs need to enable people to take up their leadership by developing the competency, confidence and credibility to contribute to the tasks of leadership – setting direction, aligning interests, and enabling adaptation. Engaging in collective leadership requires the development of a new set of skills. These include navigating complex environments and learning from

experimentation rather than linear project management, and connecting within and across networks to leverage multiple assets, embracing the diversity that connection-seeking entails, and reflecting in action. *Leadership* development complements *leader* development. It is about working on a systems level to create more ‘leaderful’<sup>29</sup> organizations, communities, and policy settings such as the education system. ‘Leaderful’ systems are ones that allow and encourage people to take up leadership at all levels and where all parts of the system work concertedly to achieve a collective vision.

It is not coincidental that the above approaches make up the lines of work of various professionals in the field of leadership – comprised of scholars, consultants, and trainers/facilitators. Supporting leadership for public wellbeing entails advancing the very discipline that has largely failed to recognize it. It entails working on a discursive level to advance a more inclusive and enabling model of leadership, while building capacity for more groups to engage in leadership for public wellbeing. This is an ambitious endeavor, one that honors leadership that acts for public wellbeing in some of the most challenging contexts.

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