HOW SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IS LIBERATING LEADERSHIP FROM THE GREAT-PERSON MOLD

The Great Person Theory is holding back leadership. Not the popular 19th-century Great Man theory of human history. I will leave that one to the sociologists and historians. I am talking about the assumptions many 21st-century citizens make about personality, behavior, and leadership. I am talking about an implicit behavioral theory that many of us hold without recognizing it. This theory can deceive us. It can make us think that leadership requires “naturally” exceptional persons who are “inherently” blessed with some specific set of traditional skills, such as problem-solving, persuading others, and exercising judgment. It shapes who we think can lead and what we think leaders should do.

This implicit theory creates what I will call the Great-Person mold. The mold constrains thinking and constricts leadership in two critical ways: It limits who we consider as potential leaders; and it encourages omissions, inefficiencies, and outright misconceptions when we think about what makes for effective leadership.

By invoking knowledge from psychological science—about how we think about other people and how we can influence others’ behavior—we stand poised to smash the Great-Person mold. This does not mean there is no room for greatness in leadership. Rather, this widens the pool from which great leadership can be drawn. Moreover, it encourages “ordinary” individuals to cultivate proven skills that can make anyone a more effective leader; and allows for leadership from anywhere, not just from on high. Social psychology, by emphasizing the power of situations to determine individuals’ behavior, shows that individuals can lead by thoughtfully engineering other people’s situations.

We can liberate leadership from the constrictive Great-Person view in theory and in practice. I first draw from social psychology to explain why the Great-Person mold has so heavily constrained leadership. I will suggest that a number of classic decision-making and social judgment biases are responsible and that these biases have influenced both the scientists who study leaders and the societies that choose them. I then call for a focus on leadership skills rather than leadership traits and finally offer a few examples for how psychological science can make (all) leaders more effective.

Making the Mold: How Psychological Biases Contribute to Great-Person Thinking

To understand the Great-Person mold, first consider what most Westerners think when asked to close their eyes and imagine a leader. Usually, what comes to mind is a single, outgoing, powerful individual. (Not incidentally, that individual is more likely than not to be male, white, and probably tall.) The backstory of that hypothetical leader probably involves a rise to power based on some inherent greatness and natural or preternatural ability to influence followers. This is the Great-Person mold, or stereotype.

To understand how the mold persists in people’s minds and how it unduly influences the selection of new leaders, which then perpetuates the mold, you have to further consider the cycle of systematic, cognitive biases at play. The cycle starts with the stereotype. When people think leader, they tend to think male. They also think of agentic qualities rather than communal qualities. And, in most Western cultures, they tend to think of people at the front or top of organizations, rather than at the back or bottom.
Based on preconceived notions of what makes a leader, certain individuals (or certain kinds of individuals) come to mind more readily when leadership is needed. From the citizen’s perspective, this could be when it is time to formally appoint a leader or just when one is looking around informally for guidance. For researchers, this would be when they are deciding whom to study to learn about leadership.

The consequence is that we do not look to others outside of the stereotype for leadership. We neglect people who do not fit the demographics, the personality mold, or the traditional skill-set, and we miss the potential leadership of individuals from countless underrepresented groups. We overlook people with great potential to affect positive social change. We also overlook non-traditional ways of accomplishing this change, such as those I will discuss in the next section. By not thinking about the potential leaders who did not get a chance to lead, we commit omission neglect—that is, we fail to think about what did not happen or what information is not available\(^5\). We often do not consider potential leaders who are not already in the usual choice set.

When leaders emerge, further biases can affect the evaluation of their performance. Confirmation bias refers to our (often unintentional) natural tendency to seek information that will confirm our working hypotheses at the expense of information that might disconfirm them\(^6\). If we think that certain people are leadership material, we give them a chance to lead. We often mentally assimilate them to our view of the ideal leader and we enable them to influence the group. Often, the very act of looking to others for guidance brings out their leadership skills. When we look at leaders, our minds are often able to “find” leadership and our behavior towards them often elicits actual leadership. We give them the autonomy, resources, and deference that should enable them to succeed. When this happens, we neglect to even test the hypothesis that other, possibly better, leaders could come from other places.

Then, finally, we observe outcomes—earnings sheets, win-loss records, lives saved, legislation passed—and attribute those outcomes disproportionately to inherent characteristics of the people, while
neglecting often powerful situational influences that also contributed. We commit this fundamental attribution error because presidents are often more visible than the economic conditions they inherited; because head coaches are often more visible than the general managers and salary limitations that determine their lineups; because CEOs are often more visible than organizational culture and innovation. 

Because we see leaders more clearly than the situations that facilitate or inhibit their success, we often over-attribute an organization’s outcomes to some qualities of the leader. We tend to give them too much credit for successes and too much blame for failures. When things go well, we look for more leaders just like them. But when things go poorly, we rarely realize that the leadership mold is flawed. Instead of looking outside the mold, we refine our search within it. We continue looking for one inherent personality trait that brings about success. If we would just consider the circumstances afforded many great leaders – the opportunities they had, the formal or informal training they received, the conditions they inherited – then we could focus on providing similar opportunities for future leaders. We could stop trying to find leaders and start trying to cultivate them.

**Breaking the Mold: Moving from Who Leaders Are to What Leaders Do**

The other major setback of Great-Person thinking is that this mindset fuels the idea that leaders are born. Perhaps some are. But if you hold too rigidly to this thinking, then you miss the possibility that leaders can also be made. Through an understanding of how people think, behave, and interact, anyone can improve on the skills that make for effective leadership.

*The “classic skills”: Doing what leaders are supposed to do ... but doing it better*

The “classic skills” are those that we traditionally associate with leadership: arguing, motivating, organizing, planning, deciding, and negotiating. An understanding of how people process information and pursue goals can help leaders to be more effective and more efficient in these standard skills.

Take persuasion as an example. It is a central, “classic” leadership skill. Imagine that you want to urge fellow citizens to conserve energy. Going solely on intuition, most leaders would begin mounting arguments immediately. They think, “If we just present the right information and rely on reason, people will see the light.” Professor Noah Goldstein, one of the speakers in our *New Science of Leadership* symposium, and his colleagues tested people’s intuitions about exactly this question. A survey of over 800 Californians found that residents believed they would be most swayed by good arguments about environmental protection. The residents said they were least influenced by “other people doing it.” Like most of us, they thought that arguments were the most important factor and social norms the least important factor.

In an experiment that followed, however, Goldstein’s research team found the exact opposite pattern for actual behavior. Changing social norms by telling individuals that “most people in your community are finding ways to conserve energy at home” was the most successful factor in reducing their actual energy consumption. This trumped informational campaigns alone. In addition to providing a nifty trick for energy-saving campaigns, this study, in concert with countless others, reveals a more general principle: people are quite often blatantly wrong about what influences their own and others’ behavior. Leaders who go by their gut will commit exactly these same mistakes.
Leaders who understand psychology, however, will have a valuable guide for influencing others’ behavior. Similar bodies of work inform many of the other classic skills as well. Thus, the scientifically-informed leader will be a more effective motivator, decision maker, evaluator, and negotiator.

**The “new skills”: Leaders as situational designers**

Where social psychology can really exploit the leadership market, so to speak, is by highlighting a set of otherwise overlooked “new leadership skills.” If we acknowledge the profound power of the situation to shape behavior, then the psychologically-savvy leader can change people’s internal, subjective interpretations of their circumstances or their external, objective environments.

Consider a community leader who is trying to improve health in local schools. If we fall victim to Great-Person thinking, then we are stuck imagining this person pursuing change through a constrained set of means. We see her giving a rousing speech at the school board meeting. We see her arguing with the superintendent about calories, costs, and coronaries. We see her cajoling fellow community members into joining her organization. And these tactics may indeed help accomplish her goal. But social psychology shows that these are not the only paths for change. They may not even be the most effective. The key to fewer calories may be through something as simple as getting smaller plates into the cafeteria or redesigning the lunch-line in a wise way. Both are features of the external environment, and neither relies on a personal plea.

In the end, the potential tactics a leader might use to shape the situation are countless. Underlying these levers for influence is the basic notion that behavioral change does not have to start with attitude change. In fact, changing behavior first is often a path to durable attitude change as a consequence. Recognizing that leaders can exert profound influence by shaping an individual’s situation changes the playing field drastically. It means that leaders need not be the imposing, assertive figure sitting atop an organizational hierarchy. Leaders can also be the situational designers and decision architects who set the context.

**Conclusion**

Social psychology is often defined as “the scientific study of how people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real, imagined, or implied presence of others.” With only a slight re-ordering and barely a change of words, one could use this as a suitable definition of leadership too: “the strategic influence of people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors by the real, imagined, or implied presence of others.” If leadership is, nearly by definition, a strategic application of the principles of social psychology, then it is time to import social psychology’s fundamental insights. These insights will help free our minds from artificial restrictions about who can lead and will provide insight for how anyone can lead more effectively.
References


