Romance of Leadership

Leadership is one of the most discussed, studied, and written about topics in our society. Should it be? The *romance of leadership* (ROL) is an attributional approach to leadership that attempts to understand when and why we recognize and give credit to leaders for influencing and changing our institutions and societies. First introduced by leadership scholar James R. Meindl and colleagues, this approach highlights the fact that leaders and leadership issues often become the favored explanations for both positive and negative outcomes in organizations. In addition, subsequent research has demonstrated that people value performance results more highly when those results are attributed to leadership and that a halo effect exists for leadership: If an individual is perceived to be an effective leader, his or her personal shortcomings and poor organizational performance may be overlooked. This entry defines the ROL perspective and then turns to implications and critiques of this approach.

The Theory

Based on a series of studies, the ROL suggests that we overwhelmingly tend to favor leaders and leadership as the causal force behind the activities and outcomes of organizations. In part, a critical response to a prevailing emphasis on the importance of *leaders* in the leadership process (as opposed to an emphasis on followers or the situation), the ROL theory was developed to call attention to the fact that whatever the "true" impact of leaders and leadership in organizations and societies, leadership as a concept has attained an immenseand perhaps often unwarranted popularity in our understanding of the world. Simply stated, despite centuries of study and decades of formal research, the concept of leadership remains largely elusive and resistant to attempts to unravel its mystique. Yet we continue to believe in its import and efficacy, even in situations in which we have no direct evidence to support this belief.

The ROL was introduced as one of the first explicitly *follower*-centric approaches in an effort to balance the many leader-centric approaches that dominated leadership research and practice. Meindl pointed out that leadership had attained a seemingly heroic, larger-than-life status and urged us to consider the implications of relaxing the often taken-for-granted assumption that leadership is important in its own right. Particularly in light of the growing appreciation of external factors and the surrounding environment in which organizations operate, he suggested that we need to question and systematically explore the value and significance of leadership in modern organizations.

The ROL approach helps highlight and question the esteem, prestige, charisma, and heroism attached to various forms of leadership. In addition, the vast majority of research and popular business attention has focused on leadership as a positive force on followers and society. As a result, the ROL perspective questions our collective fascination with leadership and our emphasis on heroism, charisma, and the glorification of leadership in the face of any real evidence that a given leader is really worthy of such praise.

Implications of the ROL Approach

Leadership Portrayals in the Media

The ROL is often reflected in the images of leaders that are produced in the mass media. More often than not,

leaders are presented in the form of portraits of successful individuals or images of great leadership figures, and popular leadership books are touted as never-before-revealed secrets of leadership effectiveness. These images reflect our appetite as a society for leadership products and behaviors that promise to enrich and improve our lives. In addition, such compelling images of leadership appeal to our cultural fascination with the power of leadership and serve to fixate us on the personas and characteristics of leaders themselves (especially high-profile leaders). However, this one-sided emphasis on the positive forms of leadership can be dangerous, for it suggests that leaders are inherently positive forces for individuals, organizations, and humanity as a whole.

Exploring previous writing and scholarship on leadership provides an important window into our beliefs, both as individuals and as a society, about the topic: what constitutes leadership, why it is important, what makes it successful, and what decisions or assumptions we make about the effects of leadership. Our basic assumptions about leadership are influenced by how it is defined and discussed in popular books and media and by the types of leadership that are both publicly idealized and sometimes demonized as well. An analysis of popular leadership books, for example, reveals that leaders are seen as effecting change, possessing great experience and knowledge, and providing their followers with opportunities to reach their unique potential. These conceptualizations all fit our cultural stereotypes of "great" leadership. The ROL perspective encourages us to question and debate the functions that leadership serves within society, as well as the broader trends that inform our discussion about what leadership is, what good leadership looks like, and how we decide whether a leader has truly made an impact.

Followers and Followership

The ROL also draws attention to followers' perceptions of leadership as worthy of study in their own right, in parallel to or independent of how the leader actually behaves. As a result, the theory has fostered research into the needs of followers and situational factors that may create greater or lesser susceptibilities to leadership. In addition, the theory emphasizes that followers socially construct images of leadership, meaning that the interactions among followers about a leader may be just as important as the actual behaviors of the leader in understanding the leadership process. As a result, researchers have examined issues such as how leadership influence spreads among followers, even in cases in which followers have had no direct contact with or exposure to a leader. Specifically, understanding followers' emotional reactions to a leader plays an important role in followers' conclusions about whether their leader is an effective or "good" leader, worthy of extravagant stock options or a vote to remain in political power.

Another important implication of the ROL approach is that sense-making processes are integral to understanding leadership and may help us understand why leadership is so enigmatic. Stated more simply, individuals learn what leadership is and what to make of leadership behaviors through their interactions with one another. Followers' decisions to attribute leadership to an individual are to a large extent the result of their interactions and communications with each other, in which they share information about the leader and compare one another's views about what his or her behavior means. Followers are thus viewed as active, powerful players in the leadership process and not passive, compliant, obedient "sheep" at the mercy of their leaders. In addition, followers' psychological needs, ideas about what leadership should look like, and decisions about what leaders are responsible for all play crucial yet underexamined roles in the leadership process.

The ROL perspective also provides another view on charismatic leadership, suggesting that *charisma* is itself a socially constructed phenomenon that says as much about followers and the situation as it does about leaders. For example, Meindl found that individuals in leadership roles are perceived to be more charismatic to the extent that the organization they lead undergoes a crisis turnaround (e.g., moving from loss to profit) rather than a crisis decline (e.g., moving from profit to loss). In addition, attributions of charisma to a leader are not solely grounded in the direct interactions between leaders and followers but rather are strongly impacted by followers' interactions with their peers as well.

Through this approach, we can more readily understand why there are so many discrepancies in perceptions of charisma and a given leader's charismatic appeal. We can also examine how followers vary in their susceptibility both to the belief in the efficacy of leadership and to the charisma of a leader. For example, research suggests that the first followers to succumb to the charismatic "virus" are likely to be high in agreeableness and emotional intensity. In addition, this approach highlights the importance of one's social network in understanding perceptions of leadership and suggests that those who are more central and connected to others are more likely to spread charismatic appeal to others.

Critiques of the ROL Theory

Despite efforts to characterize it as such, Meindl continually pointed out that the ROL perspective was not antileadership but simply an alternative to most existing theories and perspectives that place great weight on the leaders themselves and assume that leaders' actions all have equal importance and significance. Thus, the ROL perspective does not reject or minimize the importance of leaders in leadership but simply argues that it is easier to believe in leadership than it is to prove it. In addition, Meindl pointed out that we need to continually question the prevailing emphasis on leaders to the detriment of followers. Overall, the ROL suggests that we need to complement existing leader-centered approaches with more follower-centered approaches and take into account the social-psychological processes among followers in understanding the leadership phenomenon.

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Further Readings

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