

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Legacy, leadership, and a leadership legacy

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Abstract

The nexus of legacy and leadership is an understudied area. Drawing on the legacy of leadership researcher, Professor Ken Parry, and incorporating several well supported themes of the phenomenon of leadership, the similarities between legacy and leadership are explored. Key themes include followership, sensemaking, change, context, the social influence process, and leadership as artifact.

Key words: leadership; sensemaking; role of time; knowledge transfer

Highly respected for his insightful and novel research contributions, Professor Ken Parry was also an inspirational teacher to many. On my recent return to academia, I was struck by how my leadership thinking is again being influenced by Ken's writings, his legacy of leadership research. I realised that in the 10 years I had spent coaching executives to develop a legacy of their leadership, I had ignored the role their legacy played in the leadership process. These thoughts are reflected on and developed in this paper. Inspired by Parry and Hansen's (2007) proposal that a story can operate as a leader, I similarly explore the characteristics that leadership and legacy share across several diverse themes. Legacy as a form of knowledge transfer in organisations is first considered. Followership, central to both leadership and legacy is then discussed. Subsequently, legacy is considered alongside sensemaking, temporal barriers, changing context, and leadership by artefact. In doing so, I show how Ken and his colleagues contributed to the leadership debate and pushed the domain forward, touching upon some of the contemporary research developments this work has highlighted. I also incorporate my own personal experience to generate research ideas, a suggestion made by Jackson and Parry (2011). I end with a personal reflection on being Ken's first doctoral student and the legacy that has left me for teaching and supervising my own students.

Legacy and Leadership

A legacy is 'something transmitted or received from a predecessor' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.); the imprint and significance of a person's talents and passions that continue to exist (Fierke, 2015). For executives, their legacy defines and impacts upon their organisation (Reed, 2009), its people, and their wider community of practice. On reflection, I noticed those executives' legacies incorporated components that commonly define leadership: a process of influence, on a group of others, towards an outcome or goal (Parry & Bryman, 2006). Executive legacies, in my experience, were replete with these leadership components. For example, one retiring executive client sought to influence the team he was leaving by sharing his expert knowledge. His legacy included written organisational manuals detailing his team's procedures and practices. The goal of the executive's legacy was to ensure the team continued to follow team processes for best practice that he had

developed. In short, the executive's legacy of documented expert knowledge demonstrated leadership by influencing a team of others towards a goal of maintaining best practice.

Knowledge sharing has been identified as essential to organisations' competitive advantage (Wilhelm & Durst, 2012). Yet, there is a recognised dearth of empirical studies investigating the transfer of knowledge to successors (Biron & Hanuka, 2015). This offers a fruitful avenue for research and an opportunity for organisations to consider the impact of the leadership legacies of their executives.

The true significance of a legacy lies with those receiving it (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). Avolio (2010) also emphasised successors when he argued that the quality of a legacy should be measured by the quality of the followers left behind and their subsequent accomplishments, as well as the accomplishments of the leader. From this perspective, leadership legacy and followership are intertwined.

Followership, despite its many disparate definitions (Crossman & Crossman, 2011), is central to leadership legacy within the organisational context. Definitions of followership tend to incorporate the elements of leadership (an influence process, a group or others, and goals), for example, 'the process of attaining one's goals by being influenced by a leader into individual and group efforts towards organisational goals in a given situation' (Wortman, 1982: 373). However, we need to look more broadly towards other followership definitions to incorporate the complexities of followership and legacy. For example, followership has also been defined as a hierarchically upward influence (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010). Still another definition proposes that followers actually *do* leadership, sometimes changing places to become leaders (Rost, 1995). These latter definitions create a challenge for researchers to understand how followership influences, and is influenced by, a legacy. Importantly too, the aim of the legacy may very well be leadership succession as some followers succeed their predecessor as leaders. The influence of a legacy on followership, and in developing leadership are, as yet, under-explored.

The influence a legacy has on followership also depends on how recipients make sense of the legacy. Sensemaking, central to followership and leadership (Parry & Jackson, 2016), also influences those inheriting the legacy. One investigation of legacy and sensemaking utilised an experimental design, to ascertain how legacy recipients made sense of the intention of a legacy. In this study, the participants, comprising university students and staff, made inferences about the generosity of predecessors' intentions to make sense of the legacy which, in turn, had a direct relationship to the generosity of the recipients' own legacy decisions. (Bang, Wade-Benzoni, Zhou, & Koval, 2017). Factors affecting recipients' sensemaking included the temporal lag between transmitting and receiving the legacy, and the transmitter's absence. Such factors will need to be additionally examined alongside the previously identified social, relational, and processual elements present in the phenomenon of leadership discussed by Kempster and Parry (2011), and in followership (Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2014).

The temporal barriers identified by Bang et al. (2017) also suggest the need to investigate notions of change and context in the study of leadership legacy, notions already identified in the phenomenon of leadership (Kan & Parry, 2004; Kempster & Parry, 2011). We may consider how a legacy influences those receiving it in a context different from the one in which the legacy was left. An earlier example of an executive's leadership legacy is revisited to illustrate the potential for changing context to influence legacy recipients. The earlier described executive's leadership legacy comprised written documents of their expert knowledge, such as manuals detailing best practice. This executive noted that the organisation's adoption of new automating technologies could change the context in which his team worked, rendering the more procedural elements within the manuals obsolete. The executive also noted that the team would need to reinterpret or redevelop those procedures, thereby potentially reducing the influence of his leadership legacy. Another interesting consideration is the personal and role transitions, and the leadership challenges that leadership legacy recipients experience as the influence of the leader is replaced by the influence of their legacy.

Leadership does not have to be conducted by a person (Kempster & Parry, 2019). Organisational stories, also contain the elements of leadership (Parry & Hansen, 2007), as does artificial intelligence (Parry, Cohen, & Bhattacharya, 2016). Such examples engender support for the idea that artefacts, such as a legacy, can display the key elements of leadership. The term ‘leader’ does not even exist in a number of cultures (Kempster & Parry, 2019). Highly critical of the leader focus in research and popular culture and ever reluctant to be called a leader, Ken Parry repeatedly emphasised investigating the process of leadership over the leader (Parry & Hansen, 2007; Kempster & Parry, 2019). Yet, the transmitter is not entirely removed from influencing the leadership legacy process. If receivers perceive a predecessor’s intentions to be generous, the next generation of leaders tends to provide more generous legacies themselves (Bang et al., 2017).

To provide an example of this generosity effect, Ken’s many contributions leave the next generation of leadership researchers and students a treasure trove of leadership ideas. I have drawn on just a few of his publications to demonstrate how he influenced thinking about leadership. The impact of such a legacy relies on how such ideas are made sense of, their influence, and the accomplishments of successors.

Would I call Ken a leader? With respect to his wishes, perhaps not. Would I consider Ken’s legacy of leadership research to be highly influential? Absolutely. Will Ken’s writings and teachings encourage researchers to discuss and debate leadership and followership ideas? Totally. Will researchers grab those ideas and take the lead? They already are. Is the ever-changing terrain of leadership research richer and moving in novel directions because of Ken’s legacy? Undoubtedly.

Reflective Note

When Ken established his first official Centre for the Study of Leadership, he said to me, his first PhD student, ‘If my door’s open, come in anytime’. For the rest of his life, Ken kept his door open. One legacy that I now strive to share with my own students is the spirit of generosity Ken always showed me. That is, the genuine interest, the collegiality, the kindness, and the care. As I listen to my students grappling with their emerging theories and ideas, I am reminded of the full attention with which Ken listened to me. As I listen, one question is balanced on the tip of my tongue, the one question that Ken always asked me, the question aimed at developing my own ‘something of significance’, ‘So what?’

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