Ambiguity Tolerance: Why Followers Need Leaders

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Author Details:

Hartwell T. Paul Davis
Regent University
School of Business and Leadership
Virginia Beach, VA, USA

3325 Evergreen Road
Zellwood, FL 32798
Phone: 386-785-4740
Email: hartdav@regent.edu

Biographical Details (if applicable):
Author: Hartwell T Paul Davis holds a Masters in Management and Leadership (MAML) from Liberty University, an Educational Specialist (Ed.S) degree in teaching and curriculum from Liberty University, and is a doctoral candidate in the field of Organizational Leadership and Human Resources with Regent University. Mr. Davis has authored and published one book entitled *Restoring the Five Fold Ministry*, and his paper *The Called, Chosen, and Faithful Leader* is among those he has published in the Educational Information Resources Services (ERIC) online journal database. Mr. Davis teaches business management, psychology, and composition at the university level, and has been an adjunct faculty in the field of computer applications.

Structured Abstract:
Purpose — Why do followers seek for leadership? The new paradigm of leader-follower relationship exists in the context of a changing world full of ambiguity brought about by globalization, technology, and environmental turbulence. Since human nature is about controlling life's circumstances, resulting in self-efficacy, a world of uncertainty creates a dynamic of change which is considered the primary purview of leadership. This suggests that leaders have a greater tolerance for ambiguity and that followers seek out leaders because of a lessor tolerance for ambiguity. This paper posits that tolerance for ambiguity is a primary reason why followers seek out leaders, and leadership skills related to tolerance of ambiguity may be the most important reason for the leader-follower relationship.

Design/methodology/approach — this paper draws upon a literature review of leadership studies, but is written as a philosophical treatise concerning the concept of ambiguity tolerance differences between leaders and followers that give rise to leader-follower relationships.

Findings — this paper is a conceptual paper suggesting ambiguity tolerance is an outgrowth of self-efficacious behaviour that is characteristic of leadership equipped to meet today's challenges. Followers have a desire for self-efficacy but lower tolerance for ambiguity leads them to seek out leaders primarily for the purpose of clarity. In the perception of followers, the most important characteristic of leadership is credibility in how leaders frame ambiguity and change.

Research limitations/implications — this paper is not based on formal research but is a conceptual paper drawing upon a literature review of the topic. It is general in nature and written to provoke thinking in the field of leadership studies.

Practical implications — Leaders must understand the importance of creating a vision and framing the context of change. Clarity and communication are essential elements in developing followership. Credibility is the essential test of sustaining a leader-follower relationship. Efforts at developing leadership skills should focus on developing a tolerance for ambiguity, then using those skills in framing ambiguity for the comfort level of their followers. This means creating a vision, and communicating clarity to those that look to leadership for answers.

Keywords:
Leadership, Ambiguity tolerance, Learning, Globalization, Management, Change

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Conceptual Paper

Running Heads:

<div align="center">Ambiguity Tolerance: Why Followers Need Leaders?</div>

Why should anyone follow a leader? The Holy Grail of leadership studies may still be the illusive answer to the question "Are leaders born or are leaders made". The topic of leadership has engendered multiple theories dealing with traits, behaviours, personalities and abilities. Myriad scholars involve themselves in dissecting styles, skills, emotions, and characteristics of the best known leaders, making countless inquiries into how leaders think, feel, or act under given circumstances. Has anyone bothered to count the number of leadership case studies, or is there a compendium of leadership strategies that can be compiled into a comprehensive leadership desktop reference? The subject is too vast and complex, so the question of what makes a leader will never be answered in any simple terms. It may be simpler and far easier to answer the question, "Why do people follow leaders?"

In a world beset by confusion and uncertainty, followers want leaders that can lead in the dark, make decisions when there is too little or perhaps too much information, and who are more than problem solvers. They must be solvers of the mysteries of life. Leaders must be able to make life experiences meaningful for those that follow by resolving the confusion about the unknown. Leaders, like detectives must be masters at solving mysteries, and like puzzle solvers, able to see the big picture.

Davis (2009) writes, "Leadership is a product of relationship. In order to be a leader, one must have followers; otherwise a person might simply be a manager" (p. 2). Bolman and Deal (2008) observe "leadership is not something that is tangible but that exist only in relationships. It is in the perception of the engaged parties" (p. 35). Davis writes, "It is not about authority, although many leaders have authority. It is not about the ability to manage, yet leaders *do manage*" (p.2).

Gallos (2008) writes, "Managers, says Kotter, bring order from chaos through planning, organizing, and controlling. Leaders, in contrast, help organizations cope with change and opportunity by focusing on

vision, network building, and the relationships needed for a strong organizational future" (p. 3). Change in the 21ˢᵗ Century global environment is more complex than prior centuries. Globalization introduces new problems for the leader who must be relationship builders. "Successful leaders need to understand people and organizations, tasks, and processes, self and others" says Kotter (2008, p.3). The environment for business has changed to that of a global community with many multi-national organizations. Relationships are infused with cultural dynamics. Understanding people and organizations requires skills that are only developed over time. Cultural awareness must be learned and practiced.

Ambiguity – Mysteries and Puzzles

Change is full of unknowns and is much like a mystery. Treverton (2008) compares ambiguity to trying to solve a mystery. Of mysteries Treverton writes,

> It poses a question that has no definitive answer because the answer is contingent; it depends on a future interaction of many factors, known and unknown. A mystery cannot be answered; it can only be framed by identifying the critical factors and applying some sense of how they have interacted in the past and might interact in the future. A mystery is an attempt to define ambiguities (para. 2).

Mysteries only stop being mysteries when all questions are answered. In the case of life, the future always has unknowns, in-spite of great planning. The concept of *change* as it refers to ambiguity is that change is a certainty. What can be known about life is that change is assured and because of change, life will always be a mystery. Challenges for leaders are (1) they will never know for certain everything that will change, and (2) what can be known about what will change? The greater leadership challenge is how to make followers comfortable with what is unknown or may never be known. How do leaders get followers to follow in the face of the unknown? Last, how can leaders enhance tolerance ambiguity and self-efficacy of the follower?

Leaders must define ambiguities and create greater clarity. In defining ambiguities leaders must frame the certain and uncertain aspects of change to the comfort level of followers. With any great mystery, detectives must know how to speak to the assumptions for what is known or unknown, present known facts,

and create context for the unknowns as clues yet to be discovered. Followers who are experiencing a life of ambiguities recognize no one has all the answers, but expect leaders to be sense-makers of clues that are uncovered.

Snow (2010) defines ambiguity as "uncertainty about probability, created by missing information that is relevant and could be known" (p. 133). However, ambiguity does not always result from missing information. Ambiguity is like having a puzzle.   Instead of a lack of information or not having all the pieces, it is like having all the pieces scattered across the table. There is a picture to be made, but how do all the pieces fit together? In today's global economy, a lack of information is seldom the problem. Information represents the pieces of the puzzle, and the variable may simply be the size of the puzzle. Technology makes it possible to gather data, sort data, distribute data, and build solution sets for almost any economic scenario. The leader might be challenged by one major problem; the box with the picture of the finished puzzle is missing. In this case, the leader's vision is the complete picture.

Leadership in the context of change

It is in the context of change where we discover the differences between leaders and followers that suggest the answer to the question, "Why do people need leaders". Change involves whole organizations, whole communities, and whole governments. The focus of practice is changing from business to *international business*. There is a subtle but ongoing indication that "law" is being replaced with *international law*. What does the future hold for international monetary policies, national currencies, and the potential for greater change to a one-world political and economic system? Could this happen in the near future?

Rosen (in Huber, 2003) describes the new business climate where we need to "suspend our beliefs about what is true because the facts of life alter daily. From simplicity to complexity, from clarity to ambiguity, from certainty to unpredictability, the chaos navigator quickly develops an entirely new mind set for change" (p. 53). Leaders as chaos navigator need new skill sets, but must recognize change is not only

about the leader. The context for change is no longer limited to the small or local but is all encompassing on a global scale. Followers also wrestle with change, and their tolerance for ambiguity is indicative of self-efficacy or a lack therein. Low tolerance of ambiguity is one reason why followers look for leadership in times of uncertainty.

The fact is that businesses now operate in a climate of ambiguity exacerbated by governmental policies, rapid technological advances, a multi-national business environment, and changing conditions brought about by changes in the world economy. Hubbard (2007) writes, "Business today is widely decentralized, fiercely entrepreneurial, and relentlessly global" (p. 46). This means leaders have to contend with a broader sphere of influence because the leadership environment has expanded with a growing number of diverse followers. Is it possible to be all things to all men? The core principle of leadership is to identify the opportunities and threats, create a unifying vision for the organization as a whole, and then create and communicate the context for change which will turn the vision into reality. The vision and the reality must be suitable for a 21st century marketplace, and increasingly suitable for a global business environment. In order to lead in a world that is changing, leaders must be able to connect with all their followers, no matter how diverse.

The answer to the question of why followers need leaders is because change creates the need for learning. The changing world means changes in skills needed in the workplace. There are both new kinds of technology and a new kind of workforce. There are ever changing legal requirements for business and these impact followers as well as leaders. Business decisions impact family decisions: and many of these disrupt a family's way of life. Changes in health care insurance, wage laws, plant relocation, and a company's environment may result in a complete change of career.

Vail (1996) contends the relevancy of three questions; the what, how, and why of things we must know. Vail wrote, "We need to understand human learning in terms of all three dimensions: know-how, know-what, and know-why" (Kindle loc 356 of 2489). Change requires re-learning or perhaps new learning,

but learning is in itself a matter of change. Vail defines learning as "Changes a person makes in himself or herself that increase the know-why and/or the know-what and/or the know-how the person possesses with respect to a given subject" (Kindle loc 356 of 2489). The problem is that the three dimensions are not always in sync and the need to know why or what does not always result in know-how. Leadership must be holistic in its approach to learning in order to equip followers in their change process.

Ambiguity tolerance: the development of self-efficacious leaders

Leaders need a high degree of ambiguity tolerance. Katsaros and Nicolaidis (2012) write, "Tolerance of ambiguity is defined as an individual's ability to respond positively to ambiguous situations" (p. 38). Humans in general are frustrated with lack of information, poor communication, not knowing, uncertainty – and change. Ambiguity can elicit emotional or attitudinal responses ranging from confusion to anger, or on the other hand it can bring about other responses including skills related to problem solving or self-determination to seek out answers. Tolerance of ambiguity refers to the level of emotion and the "range of reactions to stimuli that are considered unfamiliar, complex, uncertain, or subject to multiple interpretations" (Katsaros & Nicolaidis, p. 38).

Bandura (1997) writes, "The striving for control over life circumstances permeates almost everything people do throughout the life course because it provides innumerable personal and social benefit" (pp. 1-2). Self-efficacy is associated with self-influence and determinism. It is the perception that one is capable of making the right choice or exercising influence over what they do. For example, Bandura defines *freedom* "as the exercise of self-influence to bring about desired results" (p. 7). The person with a high degree of self-efficacy is one that has developed abilities and skills through autonomous and self-directed learning, otherwise known as the "school of hard knocks".   In reaching levels of self-efficacy, behaviors associated with autonomy and self-directed learning increase the resolve and attitudes that enhance tolerance for ambiguity. Self-efficacious individuals create their own certainty, discover answers, solve problems, and develop offensive measures that work against the emotional effects of ambiguity.

Bandura notes, "It is usually the most self-efficacious individuals who assume leadership positions of high potential stress and strain" (p. 16). The exercise of personal control that builds self-efficacy happens as a part of life experiences that require taking personal responsibility, enduring both success and failure, working through problems, completing objectives and achieving goals, and practicing autonomous learning. The degree of self-efficacy relates to the degree of autonomy one has in the learning experience. Said another way, the less help, the more self-efficacy is likely to occur.

The dynamic of self-efficacy as a leadership attribute suggest that leaders and followers differ in self-efficacious behaviors and can also infer there is a difference in tolerance of ambiguity between leaders and followers.

Ambiguity tolerance at the followership level

Bandura (1997) writes, "These burdensome aspects of personal control can dull the appetite for it" (p. 16). The many requirements for developing self-efficacy often take place in the midst of ambiguity because experience is a part of the *change process*. Change by its nature is a tension between that which *is* and that which *will be*, the form of which is different. While change can be controlled, ambiguity may exist at different levels in the change process. For some, ambiguity has the effect of making the molehill look a mountain, so starting a task may not happen at all. For others, an unfamiliar place or a difficult problem creates more uncertainty, so a person may quit trying to solve a problem or learn a new task.

For some, being able to act in accordance with one's own choice negates the *desire* for leadership. It does not conclude that it negates the *need* for leadership, a fact that is important to leaders. Jerry (2013) observes, "For the leader to inspire and lead, however, the followers must be willing and able to be inspired and led" (p. 348). Some never see the need for a leader which is a recipe for eventual disaster. There are those that would flounder in their own autonomy supposing they have freedom but in reality become slaves to circumstances. There are, sadly, those whose tolerance for ambiguity has caused them to capitulate to ambiguity by yielding control of their lives to others who are perceived as having all the answers and supply

all the needs. As a result the tolerance for ambiguity is *underdeveloped*, as self-efficacy is replaced with assimilation or accommodation. Bandura (1997) notes, "Some theorists characterize efforts to change existing realities as primary control and accommodation to them as secondary control" (p.29). This is certainly one aspect of why people look for leaders to follow. Bandura also states, "People use their efficacy to adapt to their environment or to change it" (p. 29). It does not follow however, that those looking for a leader or those that accommodate by having secondary control are giving up the desire for self-efficacy.

People look for someone to follow when vision, purpose, or direction is unclear. People look for guidance when something is difficult to understand or when answers to questions are unclear. People look for leadership when autonomy and self-directedness is insufficient for coping with change. However, in general people are not looking to be slaves; they are thus intent on maintaining a sense of control over life's circumstances. For the majority of human beings, leadership is desired as a *help* for controlling the circumstances of life, not as a substitute for control over circumstances of life. However, the desire for self-efficacy permeates the majority of people who see work, careers, or education as the means to cope with life's challenges. The self-efficacious human nature is to be drawn to leaders from which a person can *learn*.

Leaders in learning

Is it any wonder that the greatest leaders of history were those that made disciples, inspired learning, or were acknowledged for their mental prowess? Consider that the longest sustainable institutions with the greatest number of adherents, *another word for followers*, are religious institutions, not business corporations. Leaders such as Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Confucius, Martin Luther King, and Siddharta Gautama (Buddhism) led by teaching. The same is true of great political leaders including King Solomon, Gandhi, Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Winston Churchill. While military or business genius is acknowledged, even then the legacy of leadership is the successes of the followers. Great leaders inspire and develop great followers who in many cases achieve greater success than their predecessors.

Understanding the basic desire for learning as a way of coping with change has led to theories of leadership such as leader-member exchange, or new leadership activities such as mentoring, coaching, or job shadowing. But leader-follower relationship is not built primarily from a direct personal relationship between the leader and the follower. It happens mostly in the context of leadership activities involved in communication and vision. Very few followers have one-on-one with their leaders. Instead they follow based on the principles of what knowledge is being provided that creates the know-what, the know-why, and the know-how: that is they follow based on clarity instead of ambiguity.

Practical implication and conclusion

The dynamic of change creates opportunities for leaders, organizations, and followers who are connected in the learning process. Change is a continuing process with leadership acting as inputs to the change process and followership acting as outputs of the change process. Tolerance for ambiguity is a part of the emotional context of the process of change that creates connections between leaders and followers. If the metaphor of a hose is used, ambiguity can be likened to a restriction, a kink in the hose, which slows the process of change. These can happen anywhere along the line, but the kinks at the input side (leader side) of the hose must first be cleared before the ones toward the output side (follower side) really matters.

Learning in this metaphor represents external kink removers. What is flowing through the hose, like water, is information that represents the know-what, know-why, or know-how or human endeavour. Both leaders and followers share in process knowledge, and while this metaphor does not address the differences in the what, why, or how, the emphasis is that there exist a connection between leader and follower in the process of change. It must be understood that the terms, learning, knowledge, or know-how all represent a shared element of *cumulative process knowledge* which can only flow properly when the kinks of ambiguity are removed. The human resource department or other functional leadership is responsible for monitoring and

assisting in the change process. In the context of organizational development and as noted by Vail (1996), learning is change, the effect of which removes the kinks of ambiguity from the process of change.

Why follow the leader? Whatever the challenges in life may be, answers that are honest, relative, doable, and understandable matter. Sometimes the answer is good, sometimes bad, and sometimes indifferent, but the most important thing to a follower is that when the source is someone else, the source must be credible. Followers take risk when they yield primary control to secondary control. A friend once commented about leaders, "It is more important to be credible than incredible". This truism will resonate with most followers.

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