



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

Leadership

Contributors: Leah M. Omilion-Hodges

Edited by: Mike Allen

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Leadership is an increasingly popular area of study and is currently being investigated by communication scholars in addition to researchers in management, organizational behavior, and psychology. Because many people have conceptualized leadership as a web where the relationships of a leader and their members are delicately yet inextricably intertwined, researchers can explore a variety of communication topics ranging from the traits and behaviors of leaders themselves, to how they interact with and develop relationships with each follower, and how individual leader–member relationships impact the collective functioning of the group. Communication researchers in particular have found this a fruitful area of inquiry because of the communication-rich areas of leadership, such as relationship development and maintenance and how verbal and nonverbal communication strategies are employed to make meaning, to advocate for one's self, to exert authority, and to problem solve. Similarly, this area is also particularly attractive as communication researchers have found success in utilizing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods to conduct leadership research.

This entry discusses leadership-based communication research commencing with a view of the research process, techniques for generating relevant research questions and/or hypotheses, suggestions for conducting impactful literature reviews by presenting traditional theories, and methods used in this regard. This entry also explores commonly employed methods for data analysis, ideas for publishing findings, and tips for conducting ethical research. The entry concludes with a section that explores challenges and opportunities for conducting leadership research, acknowledging how specific trends such as globalization and the increase of virtual teams may impact this area of study.

Research Process

There are a variety of ways that communication researchers approach the area of leadership. Some communication researchers may be more likely to utilize a social scientific approach where scholars seek to study leadership in a way where they can draw generalizable conclusions about leaders and leadership constructs to apply broadly. In contrast, others may assume a discursive leadership approach. This perspective suggests that leadership is negotiated in relationship with various actors within the leadership context, which is socially constructed through communication. Neither approach is right or wrong, but instead, will align with one's research philosophy (i.e., reference entries on epistemology, ontology, and axiology). That is, researchers make assumptions about human nature that carry over to the way in which they perceive and understand leadership. Thus, basic assumptions about the ways in which leadership is enacted—how relationships develop and are maintained, and the role of communication within these contexts—impact the questions researchers ask (or the hypotheses they forward), the methods they adopt, and the interpretation of findings. The following sections discuss how communication scholars may employ various theories and methods for creating research questions and hypotheses, noting how scholarship within this area may differ substantially based on one's individual perspective of leadership.

Conducting a Literature Review

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus suggest that leadership is among the most studied and least understood concepts. This observation may have developed because there are seemingly endless trajectories to explore within leadership research. At its core, leadership has two primary ingredients: the people and the tasks. However, if one dissects this further, then one

can easily see how in regard to the people, one may consider leaders and followers. With tasks, one may consider job-related needs, such as deadlines and production, but one may also look at the relational responsibilities nested within leading and following. It is possible to narrow within these categories even more—for example, by looking at different leadership styles and their impact on various aspects of the organization (e.g., productivity, satisfaction) thus helping to demonstrate why there are so many options for conducting a literature review. In an effort to provide concrete tips for those new to leadership research, common search terms will be discussed and tips for assessing the credibility and applicability of research findings will also be forwarded.

Common Leadership Search Terms

Common search terms that one may enter into a search engine such as Google Scholar include the following: leadership, leadership communication, leadership styles, leadership behavior, leader–member relationships (also commonly referred to as leader–member exchange), leadership psychology, discursive leadership, leadership outcomes, leadership models, leadership research methods, and leadership training. Searching for followership also uncovers a number of leadership-based articles and can help researchers who are exploring leadership through the member or the follower’s perspective. Just as there are a multitude of options for conducting leadership research, there are numerous categories that fall within each of the aforementioned key terms noted. For example, if one conducts a search regarding leadership styles, then one is likely to encounter articles on various approaches to leading such as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire in addition to differences between the ways in which men and women approach leadership. Because there are natural overlaps between many of the key search terms, one may find that articles regarding shared leadership, by example, populate when on searches for leadership styles, leadership models, and leadership approaches. Therefore, it is important that when one is searching for a particular area of leadership, that consideration is given to the other major leadership categories with which it may be cross-listed in order to conduct a comprehensive search.

Assessing the Credibility of the Search

After a researcher enters a relevant leadership search term, he or she usually uncovers a number of related articles and book chapters. To continue with the shared leadership example, a Google Scholar search uncovers over 2 million results in less than 1 second. The good news is that this search, as many others within the realm of leadership, offers the researcher a vast amount of information regarding the topic. However, this also means that the researcher now has to scan through the results, select articles that are most relevant, and read widely to ensure that he or she is accurately representing the concept. Some strategies that may be used to whittle down the search are to consider when an article, chapter, or book was published, the reputation of the journal or publisher, and what methodology was employed to gather and analyze the data.

Assessing the credibility and applicability of research materials is based on a variety of criteria. As noted above, the researcher may consider the source. For example, he or she may consider an article published in a ranked, scholarly journal such as *Communication Monographs*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, or *Management Communication Quarterly* to be a better source of information than an article written for the popular press newspaper, *USA Today*. He or she may also look at prominent academic leadership journals such as *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, and *Journal of Leadership Education* as credible

sources for research regarding all aspects of leadership. In addition, many readers and reviewers will look at how recently the research was published, because this is a means to assess whether or not the findings are current within the leadership field. This is not to suggest that the researcher abandons reviewing classic foundational articles, but in general, it is advisable to review contemporary articles (i.e., published within the last 5–7 years) to ensure that the researcher is knowledgeable of the most recent trends within leadership research. In addition to the publication venue and date of publication, the researcher may consider the author of the article and/or the methods utilized to conduct the research. In many ways, these two are linked as communication researchers tend to align with particular research philosophies whereby some may be predisposed to conducting social scientific research from a quantitative perspective, whereas others may employ a critical, discursive, or interpretive lens from a qualitative perspective. Another way to streamline the search and also to assess the credibility of the search is to use theories that are traditionally applied to communication leadership research.

Theories Traditionally Used

Unsurprisingly, communication scholars often explore relational aspects of leading. Some prominent theories in this regard include leader–member exchange, relational leadership, and discursive leadership.

Leader–member exchange is a foundational theory of leadership that suggests that leaders develop relationships of varying quality with each of their followers. However, since leader–member associations develop and are enacted within the larger context of the workgroup, the relationship a leader shares with one of his or her followers has the potential to impact other followers. Broadly speaking, researchers suggest that members belong to either the in-group—those who share favorable relationships with their leaders—or the out-group—followers who share a relationship of contractual obligation with their leader. Leadership research indicates a number of benefits for those within the in-group including increases in job performance and satisfaction as well as overall well-being. Scholarship in this area may focus on outcome measures such as productivity of leader–member relationships of various quality or more recently, researchers have sought to examine how one dyadic relationship may impact another interpersonal relationship or the collective functioning of the group.

Discursive leadership is another approach commonly employed in leadership research. According to Gail Fairhurst, discursive leadership tends to be explored by researchers who tend to be social constructionist (i.e., knowledge and experiences are jointly constructed through the interactions of individuals) and more qualitative than traditional leadership scholars. As opposed to more classic approaches to leadership that tend to examine leadership within a person, situation, or a combination of people and situations, discursive leadership suggests that leadership is constructed and negotiated through communication resulting in multiple and fluid interpretations. Unlike classic approaches, discursive leadership distills the agency of the individual leader to examine how leadership is enacted by a variety of actors (those in formal leadership positions and those who are not). Relational leadership can be positioned as a form of discursive leadership. Relational leadership presumes that leadership is embedded within the everyday relationally responsive practices of leaders. In this sense, research is conducted to explore how a leader relates to his or her followers including how moral obligations are enacted through mundane and pivotal conversations. Relational leadership emphasizes the importance of trust within leader–member relationships and within the workgroup, examining leadership as an ongoing social process based on relating and organizing.

Creation of Research Questions and/or Hypotheses

In communication research regarding leadership, the most important aspect of forwarding research questions and/or hypotheses is to do a thorough review of the literature first. In fact, it is reading relevant literature that helps to remain aware of what other scholars are doing in regard to leadership research so that one can remain part of the ongoing conversation. That is, while remaining abreast of leadership developments through reading recent published peer-reviewed journal articles, chapters, and books, one may consider how to extend the field by asking a new research question or forwarding a slightly different hypothesis. One will forward a research question in order to generate greater depth of understanding in an area or if one is seeking to explore a relatively new area. For example, after reviewing preliminary and related research, a researcher may seek to understand what communication strategies new organizational members employ to access task-related information within their first 6 months of working with a new leader. In this sense, the research question is clear and focused and will give the researcher clear concepts on which to focus to begin to develop an argument for the study. Conversely, the researcher may have an article that explored a number of communication strategies new employees use within their first 6 months of working with a new leader. As a follow-up study, he or she may decide that of the four strategies found, certain strategies will be used more frequently than others. Because preliminary research is being deployed, the researcher may forward a hypothesis that suggests that new employees may be more likely to use direct request than soft communication tactics when accessing task-related information from their leaders within their first 6 months. In this case, a quantitative study from which the researcher could generate greater breadth in information would likely be favored over an in-depth qualitative study.

Best Methods for Analysis

Methods Traditionally Used

Communication researchers have found success conducting quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods leadership research. Some may seek to use qualitative methods such as focus groups or in-depth interviews in order to garner a more detailed understanding of the complexities of leading. Others may employ other qualitative methods such as a discursive analysis to examine leadership as a social construction where leader and member are simultaneously creating and responding to the leadership environment. In this sense, researchers may be particularly interested in the conversations that take place within the leadership environment so that they may look specifically at the conversational turns (i.e., how two or more actors interact communicatively) to consider power dynamics, relationship quality, and possible motivations. Qualitative scholars may conduct an artifact analysis in which they examine products produced within the leadership environment such as meeting minutes or workgroup policies and procedures. Others may also employ observation techniques in order to witness the dynamics that occur when members interact with their leader in their organizational environment. Researchers may then garner a better understanding of individual leader and member traits, communication patterns, and situational factors that are impacting the leadership setting.

Communication scholars may also utilize quantitative and/or mixed methods to conduct leadership research. From a quantitative perspective, communication researchers may create a self-report survey that they ask leaders, members, or both parties to complete. In this sense, researchers are able to use reliable and valid survey instruments to understand how

various leaders and members may align or differ on perceptions of relationship quality. Quantitative communication researchers may also create a survey or a laboratory experiment in order to isolate and study how specific aspects of leadership communication impact leaders, members, or the leadership environment. For example, communication researchers have conducted a laboratory experiment in which they manipulated perceptions of leader–member relationship quality in order to see how leader–member relationships impact peers’ propensity to develop relationships. In addition to conducting an experiment, quantitative researchers may employ a survey design whereby participants are exposed to different conditions or scenarios. Researchers are then able to draw inferences based on how participants in one condition varied from participants in another condition. Finally, in mixed-methods research, scholars may combine qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to generate both breadth and depth in their findings and interpretation. In this sense, a researcher may ask participants to take a self-report survey (quantitative) and then follow-up with in-depth interview questions (qualitative). Therefore, the researcher would be able to conduct a statistical analysis to see how participants varied on the survey, while also learning more about the lived experiences of participants through the interviews.

Conducting Ethical Research

Leadership research revolves around the communicative actions and relationships of leaders and members. This means that more than likely, the researcher will need to secure approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning the data collection process. Before beginning the IRB process, the researcher’s institute may require that a series of online readings and quizzes be completed in order to demonstrate a working knowledge of research ethics. Afterward, the researcher will submit a proposal and work with the IRB in order to secure approval for the study. This will allow the researcher to protect the participants and institute from any unnecessary liability. Also, it allows the researcher the opportunity to contemplate and finalize study instruments (i.e., surveys and/or interview guides, etc.) well before collecting data.

Publishing Findings

There are a number of outlets researchers may consider for leadership research. Communication scholars may consider submitting to a scholarly peer-reviewed communication journal such as *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, or *Communication Studies*. Researchers may also consider broader leadership journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *Leadership*, and *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*. It is important that researchers thoroughly research each journal before preparing a submission as every journal may have a different audience, methodological or philosophical preference, and logistically, different formatting and page length requirements.

Challenges and Opportunities

There are a number of challenges and opportunities on the horizon for leadership communication scholars. Namely, the changing face of the work environment is presenting new avenues for communication research in regard to globalization and virtual work teams and environments. Many companies are recognizing that if they want to continue to grow, then they must break into or expand their reach internationally. However, globalization requires companies to rethink their strategies, including the way in which they prepare their

leaders. In this sense, not only do leaders shoulder typical task and relational responsibilities, but they may also need specific training on culture sensitivity and normative differences. Thus, communication researchers may seek to explore how to build diverse leadership teams, help leaders learn how to navigate interpersonal conflict in productive ways, and help to establish training to immerse leaders in other cultures. Closely related is the idea of virtual work teams. More and more organizations are allowing or requiring employees to work from satellite offices or even from their home offices in an effort to preserve organizational resources. However, these employees still require a manager in order to ensure that they are aware of organizational goals, policies, and changes. Thus, this new trend prompts interesting questions about managing employees who are geographically disparate, including how to build community, how to ensure employees are properly trained, and how to evaluate performance in this innovative setting. Future opportunities for research within leadership also include an examination of the impacts of followers on the leader and more recently, the rise of organizations expecting “coaching” leaders where leaders are expected to simultaneously lead and coach employees to their greatest potential.

Leah M. Omilion-Hodges

See also [Organizational Communication](#); [Qualitative Data](#); [Quantitative Research, Purposes of](#); [Small Group Communication](#)

Further Readings

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Leah M. Omilion-Hodges

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