

## Leadership as a Relational Phenomenon: What This means in Practice

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This article stands in support of Eacott’s primary intention of promoting a relational approach to leadership. However, its distinctiveness is in how this relational quality of leadership is understood, described and defended. In contrast to the essentially philosophical description provided by Eacott, this article offers a far more research-informed and practical understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon. It begins by highlighting widespread international corporate research, which is paving the way for the general acceptance of leadership being a relational phenomenon. Also, the article draws upon a multidisciplinary array of understandings to illustrate what can be considered as the relational foundational of leadership, which are then captured within seven fundamental principles of relational leadership practice. The final section of this article offers a pathway for those who wish to work towards enhancing their relational leadership capacity.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <i>Received</i>                      February, 25, 2019</p> <p><i>Accepted</i>                      May, 22, 2019</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>  <i>Relational leadership, leadership foundations, relational leadership principles</i></p>

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## Introduction

As evident in our recent publication, *Leadership in higher education from a transrelational perspective* (Branson, Marra, Franken & Penney, 2018), we actively support and promote the understanding that, essentially, leadership is a relational phenomenon. Indeed, within this text we argue that ‘leadership is best understood as a transrelational phenomenon as its essence is to move others, the organisation and the leader to another level of functioning by means of relationships’ (p. 49). Although the application of this understanding of leadership within this text was in higher education, we argue that the basic principles of leadership are independent of context unlike the application of these principles. In other words, while the observable practices of leadership are somewhat variable across contexts, the values and beliefs upon which these different practices are founded are consistent. Hence, this article stands in contrast to that described by Eacott (2018, 2019) because it provides a far more research-informed practical understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon rather than a predominantly philosophical perspective.

Our concern with Eacott’s predominantly philosophical discussion of organizational and leadership theory is threefold. First, despite a desire to avoid such an outcome we believe that an essentially philosophical description is highly likely to create analytical dualisms whereby each philosophical point of view becomes an arena for contention. While academics might relish such mental jostling, it can be a source of ambiguity and confusion for those who need to practice leadership and seek guidance from its theory. A philosophical emphasis can increase complexity and decrease practicality.

Secondly, although it is argued in by Eacott that moving from ‘the organization’ or ‘leadership’ to *organizing activity* ‘generates the



possibility of engaging with fluidity and the constant flux of the social without granting too much explanatory value to structures or agency', we believe that this is completely unnecessary because a word is not a concept. For example, the word 'chair' is not the concept 'chair'; it denotes the concept, but it is not the concept itself. Hence the words 'organization' and 'leadership' communicate a concept, but these do not define or delimit what constitutes an organisation or leadership. Indeed, we argue that organisation and leadership have been an integral aspect of human existence at least since the early Holocene era some 11,000 years ago when it became advantageous for humans to gather together in well organised groups or clans for safety and sustainability reasons (Eerkens, Vaughn & Kantner, 2010). The problem is not the words, themselves, but the alignment of these to the very specific actions of industrial magnates and business tycoons during an era in which the western world was being dramatically altered by the industrial revolution. Arguably such actions were not those of leaders but more akin to those of social manipulators – actions designed to change social and work habits in order to create the perfect employee. Unfortunately, due to the incredible success and profitability of the industrial revolution's achievements during this period, many of these magnate and tycoon actions gained universal acceptance as best practice even by some today. Fortunately, as will be described later in this article, contemporary largescale research by multinational companies including Deloitte, MIT Sloan, Gallup, McKinsey and Harvard Business are challenging the effectiveness of these outdated practices and promoting a more cooperative and relational approach. It seems grossly unnecessary to be abolishing the very familiar terms of organisation and leadership just as the organisational and leadership world is ready to be influenced towards

the development of far more universally applicable and acceptable conceptualisations.

Thirdly, Eacott argues that the introduction of the new key concepts of *organizing activity*, *auctor* and *spatio-temporal conditions* is not semantics, but to the leadership practitioner it will most likely appear so – more jargon to cloud comprehension. Arguably, given that relationships are an everyday facet in the lives of most people, it appears unnecessary to apply new and unfamiliar descriptive words to a common phenomenon. We are of the opinion that, in order to promote understanding, it is far more effective to use words commonly associated with human relationships in order to highlight and describe what truly constitutes leadership practice.

Thus, while the aim of this article is to support the understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon its purpose is to provide a far more practical description and argument as to why this is so. This description will not only be based on research and teaching at the Australian Catholic University but also on the extremely positive outcomes achieved in our consultancy activities involving profit, not-for-profit, and government personnel nationally and internationally. Specifically, this article will use research and experiential data to support and describe the relational foundations of leadership and its practice. However, given the structural limitations of this article it is not possible to adequately describe the organisational implications of this perspective. However, these are very comprehensively described in our 2018 text, *Leadership in higher education from a transrelational perspective*.



## Research Supporting a Relational Approach to Leadership

We differ from Eacott's claim that 'there are few systematic research programs emerging or any coherent agenda beyond an agreement that relations are important.' Rather, we claim that there is an abundance of current largescale international research in the corporate world clearly promoting a relational approach to leadership. A discussion of some of these follows.

The 2018 Deloitte *Global Human Capital Trends Report* highlights a profound shift facing organisational leaders worldwide. Specifically, this report showcases 'the growing importance of social capital in shaping an organization's purpose, guiding its relationships with stakeholders, and influencing its ultimate success or failure' (p. 2). This report goes on to argue that the success of today's organisations is no longer simply assessed on traditional metrics such as financial performance, or even the quality of their products or services. Rather, it is claimed that organisations are now increasingly being judged on the basis of relationships amongst employees, with their clients, and with their communities, as well as their impact on society at large. Such expectations not only impact on what the leader needs to be able to accomplish but also on how they are to be a leader. One can't create such a holistic relational and socially influential culture without personally being relational and socially involved. Hence, this Report labels the highest priority in today's organisations as *The Symphonic C-suite* (p. 7) and adds that the current organisational trends 'demands an unprecedented level of cross-functional vision, connectivity, and collaboration' from the leaders. Being able to model and create harmonious team-work through healthy and mutually beneficial relationships is now considered to be the epitome of good leadership.

Similarly, in a Gallup article (2018), Robison refocuses and redefines the outcomes that organisational leaders need to achieve. Here she argues that, now, leaders need to focus on ‘people and the finish line’ the outcomes (p. 1). This way of leading is described as defining the end goals and then leaving it to individual contributors and the line-managers to determine the processes and practices in order to create the essential efficiencies and adaptability. Importantly, Robison adds, that as well as handling the usual administrative tasks leaders ‘have to know their people as people – and sometimes better than their people know themselves’ (p. 1). Something that can’t be done second-hand or by casual observation. Authentic knowledge of another person can only evolve out of a close relationship.

Also, what Robison is alluding to in this article is the issue of employee engagement – describing how the leader is able to increase an employee’s commitment and performance. Data from Gallup’s 2014 worldwide employee engagement research indicates that only 13 per cent of employees are actively engaged in their workplace, while over 50 per cent merely go through the motions of being fully engaged, and the rest are actively disengaged whereby they act out their discontent in counterproductive ways. For Kim and Mauborgne (2014), the solution to this unsustainable worldwide issue of employee non-engagement is what they refer to as ‘Blue Ocean Leadership’, with its underlying insight that leadership must be thought of as a service. More specifically, they argue that the leader should create the organizational conditions in which those they are leading want to accept their leadership. ‘When people value your leadership practices, they in effect buy your leadership. They’re inspired to excel and act with commitment. But when employees don’t buy your leadership, they disengage, becoming noncustomers of your leadership’ (Kim and Mauborgne, 2014, p. 62). Hence it is unsurprising that the Gallup (2015)



research conducted by Buckingham and Goodall supports the view that as much as 70 per cent of the variance in the employee engagement can be traced back to the influence and practices of their leader. According to Buckingham and Goodall (2015) one simple way that a leader can begin to enhance employee engagement is to ensure they actively support a mutually beneficial relationship with them. These authors suggest that such a relationship keeps priorities in focus and gives the employee the opportunity to talk about how best to do their work. Simply, employee engagement needs to be understood by leaders as an outcome influenced by their relationship with the employee.

At the heart of this relationship, according to Han Ming Chng and colleagues in their 2018 MIT Sloan Management Review article, is the leader's credibility amongst those they are tasked with leading. Furthermore, the research performed by these authors highlights that the leader's credibility is founded on 'two critical elements: perceived competence (people's faith in the leader's knowledge, skills, and ability to do the job) and trustworthiness (their belief in the leader's values and dependability)' (p. 1). More specifically, this research found that leaders were perceived as competent if they placed an emphasis on sustaining the organisation and employee's future, on promoting and acknowledging the achievement of the desired organisational outcomes, and on supporting the well-being of the employees. This research also identified the leadership behaviours that built trustworthiness as including communicating and acting consistently, protecting the organisation and the employees, embodying the organisation's vision and values, consulting with and listening to others, communicating openly, valuing employees, and offering support to employees.

Describing key leadership practices is also the focus of Gardner's 2017 Harvard Business Review article titled, 'Getting your stars to collaborate' but, in this instance, the desired outcome is that of enhancing performance quality and retaining high performers. Essentially, Gardner argues that organisational success in today's highly competitive, changeable and nonconforming corporate environment is dependent upon 'smart collaboration' (p. 102). By this she means that leaders must learn how to pool knowledge, skills and resources across boundaries within the organisation so that the most able and suitable employees can connect together in order to create new and better practices and products. Based upon her extensive research, Gardner highlights that such an essential outcome can only occur if the employees see smart collaboration amongst the leader and their leadership team. The leader must 'model the kinds of collaboration [they] want to see take root' (p. 108) Moreover, Gardner urges leaders to reinforce this commitment to collaboration by simply recognising and publicly acknowledging it wherever and whenever it is seen since 'people like seeing someone on more or less their level getting public recognition for collaborating' (p. 108). According to Gardner, a collaborative culture built upon healthy relationships from the leader down is at the heart of how today's organisations can survive and thrive.

Finally, in the McKinsey Quarterly journal (2018) Bourton, Lavoie and Vogel describe how in the current 'age of accelerated disruption ... even the best, most prescient leaders will be steering their company into, and through, a fog of uncertainty' (p.61). These authors go on to claim that:

*when faced with continual complexity at unprecedented pace, our survival instincts kick in. In a mental panic to regain control, we fight, flee, or freeze: we act before thinking ("we've got to make some kind of decision, now!"), we*





*analyze an issue to the point of paralysis, or we abdicate responsibility by ignoring the problem or shunting it off to a committee or task force. We need inner agility, but our brain instinctively seeks stasis. At the very time that visionary, empathetic, and creative leadership is needed, we fall into conservative, rigid old habits. (Bourton, Lavoie & Vogel, 2018, p. 62)*

The alternative solution provided by these authors to these reactive but unhelpful leadership habits is one that is clearly relationally-based. First, 'pause to move faster' which involves remaining personally engaged in the problem by taking the time to listen to the opinions and perceptions of others rather than feeling an obligation to find a quick fix. This involves 'embracing your ignorance' which is the second step. Accepting that others might have more relevant and helpful knowledge and skills within the current situation. Hence, instead of feeling compelled to personally solve the problem, the third step posits that the key role of the leader is to be asking the right questions of those who are more likely to come up with the solution. In this way the leader is able to achieve the fourth step which involves 'setting the direction, not the destination'. The questions asked by the leader ensures that the outcomes generated by all involved in the problem-solving process remain aligned to the vision, mission and values of the organisation. Then, the final leadership step is to guide those involved through the following two comprehensive review processes. First, before the solution implementation to anticipate consequences and prepare management strategies and, second, after the implementation process to review the outcome to ensure its desirability and sustainability. The common factor in each of these steps is the level of personal involvement, the closeness of the relationship, between the leader and each of the people involved in the process. Furthermore, it is a mutually beneficial relationship. Those

involved are not at the beck and call of the leader but rather the leader is creating work practices and culture that brings the best out of others.

Arguably, when viewed in isolation from each other, these and other research outcomes point to rather than definitively confirm the perspective that leadership is fundamentally a relational phenomenon. However, when such research outcomes are collated and compared, we argue that this perspective becomes unequivocal. A relational approach to leadership is the common factor while each research adds its own unique understanding to the inherent characteristics of such a relationship. Thus, the next section provides what these research articles could not do - a unified overview of the relational foundations of leadership. A multidisciplinary corpus of theoretical perspectives is used to achieve this end more comprehensively.

### **The Relational Foundations of Leadership**

Complexity theory urges us to acknowledge the daily presence of surprise and emergence. Not only do unanticipated things regularly happen but also new ways of successfully dealing with these happenings can unexpectedly emerge. Moreover, no matter how determined we are to control our environment in order to maintain predictability and security, surprise and predicaments invariably arise. Hence, it is argued that today's leaders cannot totally prevail over an organization's internal environment or control future outcomes as traditional leadership research suggested. If leaders cannot control the organization's internal environment or predict and manipulate the future state of the external environment, they need to acknowledge and accept that this emerges from the interactions among people throughout the organization. Much more than what the leader might choose to do, it is the people in the organization who bring about what



will happen in the organization. It is through the willing involvement of the people that the leader is able to enact their leadership. This is a contrary view to the common taken-for-granted, but misguided, belief that a person can immediately enact leadership in whatever way they wish once they are appointed to a leadership role. The formal acknowledgement of a person's public designation as a leader is also usually encapsulated in the belief that this person occupies a particularly important and essential role, which is distinguishable and discrete from that of those they are to lead. Moreover, the desired outcomes and expected actions of the role holder are often captured in a role statement to which the leader can be held accountable. Thus, both the establishment of the role and the description of the role promote a detached, line management view of the affiliation between the leader and those they are to lead.

Recent advances in sociology call into question these common assumptions associated with 'roles' and prefer to label these as 'positions' (Davies and Harré 1999; Harré and Moghaddam 2003; Harré and Slocum 2003). Seeing the responsibility of leadership as a role gives the impression that the nature of its enactment, and how others experience it, is the prerogative of the role holder and their line managers. In this sense, a role has the potential to be imposed. However, the reality of imposed roles rarely equates with the ideal. The natural tendency of those being led is to use whatever subtle or explicit means they can to cause the leader to modify their style of leadership to that of a more acceptable form. Hence, there are no real leadership roles, but rather, only negotiated leadership positions. In other words, in order to become a leader, the person must realize that the genesis of their leadership is in the everyday human interactions they have with each and every person they have the responsibility to be leading (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff 2010).

Leadership as a 'position' acknowledges that the practice and outcomes of leadership evolves largely in response to the effects generated by their interactions with those they are leading (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999). Thus, the leader is enacting a 'position' rather than performing a 'role'. Positions are socially shaped behaviours around patterns of mutually accepted beliefs, needs and expectations. Roles, on the other hand, are prescribed behaviours that are more explicit, precise, individualistic, and practical in formation and nature, and often reflect an ideal rather than the reality. To become a leader, the person needs to first negotiate with those they are leading, to build a mutually understood and accepted view of what the inherent responsibilities of the leadership position are, and how it is best to be performed (Harré and Moghaddam 2003). As a negotiated position, the ultimate image of leadership is co-constructed through the realization and consolidation of mutually accepted values, beliefs and expectations. Furthermore, Davies and Harré (1999) posit that the concept of position readily embraces the dynamic aspects of externally structured and imposed human engagements 'in contrast to the way in which the use of "role" serves to highlight static, formal and ritualistic aspects' (p. 32).

Essentially, leadership is constructed in the common daily social inter-actions among the nominated leader and those they are tasked with leading. This implies that the commonly held view of the individualism on leadership needs to be challenged. Rather, leadership is co-constructed such that the effectiveness of a leader cannot be measured by their achievement of certain practical competencies but more on how well they are able to establish mutually beneficial relational processes with those they are leading. These processes are authentically human in nature and cannot be reduced to mechanical, technical or clinical intentions designed to achieve the self-interests of



the supposed leader. They 'are characterized by a social flow of interacting and connecting whereby organizations, groups, leaders, leadership and so forth are constantly under construction and reconstruction' (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff 2010: 79). Thus, leadership is not formed from key or significant or prescribed actions initiated in particular circumstances in certain ways or at given times by a person appointed to a leadership role. Declaring a vision or implementing a policy or publicizing a new development or presenting an annual budget and so forth have little to do with the person's leadership reputation. Quite the opposite – the acceptance of a person as a leader and judgements about them as a leader are things that are incrementally formed as they move around the organization and interact with individuals and groups (Lichtenstein and Plowman 2009). Those being led are slow to judge the leadership capacity of the formal leader. They need to trust that what they first see is not only acceptable, but also authentic and typical. They need to firmly believe that the formal leader can be trusted and is reliable in their leadership behaviours. The person can only enact true leadership when, and only when, they are accepted as the leader. This means that 'leadership is not a one-way influence process but rather a reciprocal influence relationship. ... As in any other relationship, both sides contribute to its formation, nature and consequences' (Shamir 2011: 310). Essentially, the relational cornerstone of leadership is the reciprocal and dynamic interaction process between the formal leader and those to be led.

How then does leadership practice become a tangible experience? Leaders who are attuned to the pivotal relational dimension underpinning their leadership allow multiple futures and are open in terms of what these might be. Rather than controlling futures they cultivate conditions where others can produce innovations that lead to somewhat unpredictable yet largely productive future states

(Plowman et al. 2007). Their influence derives from their ability to allow rather than to direct and is grounded in people in the organization remaining engaged and connected. Through recognizing the importance of interactions as the ideal source of employee engagement, high performance and innovation, these leaders build 'correlation': the emergence of a common or shared organizational vision and a recognizable widespread pattern of positive organizational behaviour. Through this focus everyone in the organization can find meaning and purpose in whatever is unfolding.

In addition, these leaders enable the emergence of new ideas and behaviours that sustain and grow the organization by directing attention to what is important to note from contrasting the internal and external organizational environments. From this perspective, building collegiality, cooperation and teamwork should not be seen as only part of leadership but, rather, be understood as its very essence. Leadership is contextual and not generic because it emerges out of a sincere interpersonal engagement of the leader with those they are leading. In short, leadership is first and foremost relational, which implies that it is specifically suited to the unique context. Furthermore, its essence is a relationship that seeks to create a culture based upon the shared values of trust, openness, transparency, honesty, integrity, collegiality and ethicalness (Branson 2009, 2014). This is a culture in which all feel a sense of safety and security because they each feel that they can rely on each other in order to achieve their best. Through facilitating and supporting mutually beneficial relationships, the leader enables the organizational conditions to be created whereby those they are leading willingly and readily perform at their best. This, in turn, allows the leader to actually become the leader, and to continue to enact true leadership, which ensures the growth and sustainability of the organization.



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## The Fundamental Principles of Leadership

In light of the above description, and to provide further clarity and understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon, we propose that its practice is constituted upon the following seven fundamental principles.

*Leadership is earned* – being appointed to a leadership position does not make the person a leader. Rather, based upon the judgements of others about the quality of the relationship, the appointed leader must earn the right to be accepted as the leader, which comes from becoming trustworthy. Thus, the appointed person must first create the conditions in which they can be trusted by those they are responsible for leading. But this must be founded upon sincerity and authenticity, and not dishonesty and opportunism. Those being led need to trust that what they first see in the person appointed to the leadership position is not only acceptable, but also authentic and typical of their beliefs and actions. The person appointed to the leadership position must consistently ‘walk their talk’; they must model what they expect of others. Also, those to be led will want to see that what is expected of them by the appointed person is reasonable, fair, achievable and beneficial. Those to be led need to firmly believe that the appointed leader can be trusted and is reliable in how they enact their leadership behaviours. If there is no trust, there can be no leadership.

*Character trumps control* – people want to be led, not managed, and so the perceived character of the leader, as formed through the breadth and quality of the relationships they engender amongst those to be led, is far more effective in achieving the organisation’s desired outputs than is the traditional actions of command, control and management. What those to be led are seeking is an appointed leader

whose character exemplifies competence, confidence and empathy. It must be clear to others that the appointed leader is highly competent in that they have the required knowledge and skills both relevant to the functioning of the workplace as well as to becoming a leader. But this competence is enhanced by confidence, also. Confident leaders not only voice their views and opinions stridently but also, they are willing to acknowledge the limitations of their own knowledge and skills in order to learn and be supported by others. Their character reflects a growth mindset whereby they appear keen to overcome their personal limitations, to learn from alternative points of view, even criticism, and find lessons and inspiration from the success of others. Moreover, this interest and appreciation of others extends to being empathically concerned for the professional and personal wellbeing of each of those they are leading. All of these qualities necessitate a character incorporating a heightened level of emotional intelligence, which enables the leader to foster the essential positive interpersonal relational workplace environment.

*The power of influence* – people look to their leader for influence and not control. They want to be guided, not directed. The power of the leader to influence and guide is centred within their person and not in their position. Today it is widely held that leaders must first show loyalty and respect to those they are leading before these will be returned in kind. Without loyalty and respect leaders have generally depended upon discretionary rewards and punishments, or upon the presumption that they solely possess the required expert knowledge, or that they could charm and cajole others when necessary as sources of power to influence others. But such mechanisms have much less effect than previously assumed. Rather than the source of a leader's power emanating from their role, or from their capacity to reward or punish, or from their superior knowledge, or from their capacity to





charm and cajole, it arises out of the outcomes generated by the interactions between the leader and those they lead. A leader's true influential power needs to be understood as embedded in and expressed through relationships. In other words, power to influence emanates from the dynamics of the relationship between the leader and their group. Although we frequently assume that a leader's level of power is derived from their appointment to a particular role, or their inferred level of authority to reward or punish to some degree, or their perceived amount of relevant knowledge, their power is always and strictly relational. Moreover, the essence of this relational power is said to be access to truth about the organisation. Where a leader is willing and able to create and support relationships with their group that encourages an open, transparent and shared discussion about the organisation, relational power is generated. What this means is that the power of a leader to influence the beliefs, thoughts and actions of others emanates from their willingness and capacity to generate knowledge and truth in a cooperative, relational manner.

*Engagement is an emotional response* – contrary to the traditional belief that engagement is a rational issue influenced by rewards and punishments, neuroscience illustrates that it is far more of an emotional response to rewards and threats. Increasing engagement from the traditional management perspective posits that the person will become engaged and improve performance through the technical accountability processes of annual goal setting and performance reviews and the motivational processes of bonuses and career advancement possibilities. However, such well-established processes now have little impact on employee engagement given that current world-wide employee engagement figures are at an all-time low. Current research data unequivocally shows that employees have become disengaged mostly from an emotional response to

management practices that include micro-management, the loss of autonomy, being ignore by leaders, being provided with unclear purposes, being involved in poorly managed change, being adversely affected by favouritism and unfairness, and experiencing inequity in career opportunities and workload. What really increases engagement is the person's feeling that their leader invariably treats them with respect, integrity, honesty and transparency. In order to do this, the leader needs to know them well, which can only happen by means of a close and mutually beneficial relationship.

*People make the difference* – ultimately it is the people who produce the desired outputs, which create the success of the organisation, and not visions, missions, policies, procedures, structures and performance goals. People will choose to be fully engaged in their work if it has meaning for them whereby they are utilising their strengths and growing their skills, and if they are free to innovate and share their successes. Thus, a prime concern for a leader is about striving to create a sense of work-related meaning and purpose in the minds and hearts of each person they are leading. If the workplace provides meaning and purpose, those being led will naturally perform their work more efficiently and effectively, and so do not require to be closely managed and controlled. Meaning and purpose comes from a sense of personal autonomy, control and contribution over what and how they are able to perform their workplace duties and responsibilities. People want to feel a strong sense that they have the freedom to use their workplace strengths in the way they believe is best suited to the tasks at hand. Also, they want to be able to contribute their knowledge and skills towards not only finding solutions to new workplace problems but also in how to prepare their self and the organisation to meet future demands. It is the person's judgement of the level of personal autonomy, control and



contribution, which provides them with a sense of purpose and meaning rather than any sense of duty, obligation or loyalty to the person in the leadership position or to the organisation. In other words, the leader who can relate easily and openly with those they are leading in order to ensure that each person is maximising the use of their physical and mental strengths will automatically maximise the organisation's desired outputs.

*It takes a team to innovate* – gone are the days when the leader had all the answers. No one person has all the answers. Today, organisational sustainability depends on the emergence of creative and innovative solutions that are more likely to arise from within a team than from within one individual. Also, sociological and psychological research shows that people today prefer to work collaboratively, to use their knowledge and skills in support of others, and to be a part of a successful team. Moreover, it is widely accepted that an expert team will always out perform a team of experts. Thus, the essential role of the leader is not only to build connectivity, networking and teamwork amongst those they are leading but also to actively support and appropriately participate with these teams. Working with highly effective teams directly involves the leader in a relationship and not just in a structure. Within this team relationship the responsibilities of the leader are, first, to provide a compelling direction by ensuring that the purpose of the team is clear and strongly aligned to the organisation's strategy so that each and every team member knows how their work contributes to the ongoing success of the organisation. Secondly, the leader must create a strong team structure by personally ensuring that the roles and responsibilities for each team member are clearly articulated, that each team member is working to strengths and is learning and upskilling, that all required support and resources are provided, that innovation and initiative are encouraged, and that the

team is able to work autonomously but supported in its endeavours by clearly defined communication channels. Thirdly, the leader must be seen as a part of the team in order to be trusted by the team to not only fully support its activities but also to ensure that each team member is fulfilling their specified role. Finally, the leader must see themselves as a member of the team and have clear team-membership responsibilities. They must maintain a close relationship with the team so that they can readily and aptly acknowledge, reward and celebrate short and long-term individual and team achievements and successes.

*Inclusion, diversity and well-being: new pillars of leadership* - in order to create successful, sustainable and healthy organisations in today's highly competitive and ever-changing workplace environment, leaders need to know more about the people they are leading and not just about what people do at work each day. First and foremost, leaders must ensure that the people they are leading feel they are important to the organisation and that they feel included regardless of ethnicity, rank, gender, age or ability. Only those who feel truly included will consistently give of their best. Secondly, in our current unpredictable and complex workplace environment, leaders need to see, acknowledge, and utilise the diversity of skill, knowledge, experiences and perspectives amongst those they are leading because this creates the deepest pool of wisdom, creativity and innovation. Where there is diversity of abilities and knowledge, the organisation has the potential to come up with new ideas, innovations and opportunities to learn and grow. Finally, as the line between work and life blurs, providing a comprehensive array of well-being programs focused on physical, mental, financial, and spiritual health is becoming a leader's responsibility and a strategic intention to drive employee productivity, engagement, and retention. Well-being is a personal matter, so any commitment to the enhancement of well-being must be



closely aligned with individual needs. In sum, the essential leadership knowledge and practices associated with properly attending to the importance of inclusion, diversity and well-being in today's organisations comes from healthy relationships and not from observations and performance metrics.

What these seven principles illustrate is that, when it comes to leadership, *relationships count* – essentially leadership is a relational phenomenon. What establishes the existence of leadership are *relationships* not particular words or actions. Deeply effective leadership actions have their origins in the quality of the relationships that the person establishes with those they are tasked with leading. Moreover, this relational quality influences the degree of acceptance of the leader's words and vision by those to be led. Thus, deeply effective leadership is founded on the reciprocal and dynamic relational processes formed between the appointed leader and those to be led. Furthermore, these relationships are not based upon a one-way influencing process but rather a reciprocal interpersonal influencing interaction. The forming of this relationship is not a moment in time happening but evolves over time based on the interplay of ongoing conversations, social connections, and professional networking. It is not so much about what beliefs and assumptions each person has about the other, but rather what they think about their self in relation to the other and how this makes them feel about the other. In other words, authentic leaders are those who are able to engender confidence, wellness, purposefulness and optimism in others by means of the nature and quality of the relationship they have established with them.

## The Relational Pathway to Leadership

Although we have claimed that the unique relational demands required to become a leader most likely means that not every person can be a leader, this does not imply that it is impossible to learn how to become a leader. We do not accept the axiom, 'leaders are born and not made'. To the contrary, we teach current and aspiring leaders about the relational pathway to leadership so that they are better prepared to respond appropriately, if they authentically can, to each of its demands. This pathway had its genesis in the research of Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2011) but evolved further as additional multidisciplinary research provided practical responses to the key theoretical principles. Although this relational pathway to leadership has been more comprehensively described elsewhere (see for example Branson et al, 2018; Branson, Franken & Penney, 2016, 2015; Franken, Branson & Penney, 2016; Franken, Penney & Branson, 2015) suffice to say, within the structural limitations of this article, it involves the following four sequential leadership learning phases.

The *Beginning Phase* necessitates learning how to become an authentic member of the group you are to lead by being able to develop mutually beneficial relationships with all. This involves developing sincerity in your desire to be a dedicated and active member of this 'group' so that you are able to come to know and understand the people, their strengths, their culture and values. In this way you can model and promote these values thereby enabling others to build trust and confidence in your capacity to lead. This requires a high level of emotional intelligence in conjunction with a firm commitment to openness, honesty, predictability and ethical decision-making.

*Phase Two* involves learning about the positive impact of honest and heartfelt recognition and affirmation on increasing the



responsibility and engagement of others. This involves learning how to become a champion for the people you are responsible for leading. By first becoming an accepted member of the group, you are then far more able to recognise and acknowledge the good work that individuals and teams are doing. Also, this means that you are more willing and committed to filtering and protecting the group from unnecessary or unsuitable demands. This is about acknowledging and appreciating the current levels of commitment and engagement, and thereby understanding the incapacity of the group to fully or partially take on any additional responsibilities. Fundamentally, this form of championing is about the leader being willing to defend the group's right to accept, amend or reject additional commitments or responsibilities. This form of championing provides those being led with the greatest sense of trust in their leader.

*Phase Three* comprises learning how to encourage individuals and teams to be continually seeking ways to improve upon their work. This involves utilising the principles of appreciative inquiry to grow the group. To do so requires the leader to learn how to lift the workplace aspirations of others towards higher levels of achievement by fostering curiosity, possibility, and innovation; by encouraging growth mindsets; by ensuring new workplace learning is shared and celebrated; by having people working to their personally recognised strengths; and by growing relational team memberships that you personally and fully support.

*Phase Four* includes learning how to non-controversially draw the attention of the group towards what is relevant for them to be aware of in their external environment. This involves the leader learning how to keep the group connected to its wider environment so that workplace knowledge and skills remain highly relevant and secure in

the future. This involves the group being supported in looking to the future in order to determine what is necessary to be initiated in the present. Rather than telling the group what needs to happen, the leader needs to learn how to draw attention to the future possible challenges for the group in an open, honest and inclusive manner, and seek feedback from the group members as to what this might mean for the group, what individually and collectively the members of the group now need to do in order to meet these challenges, and how it would be best to initiate these required developments.

### **Concluding Comments**

Essentially, this article unashamedly stands in support of Eacott's primary intention of promoting a relational approach to leadership. However, its distinctiveness is in how this relational quality of leadership is understood, described and defended. To this end, we have argued that our current theoretical understanding of leadership is most likely an aberration due to its relatively recent historical development. It's important to acknowledge that there have been great leaders throughout human history, probably ever since humans formed into well organised groups in order to better survive and prosper. We argue that an exploration of the practice of leadership across the entire time span of human existence would produce a far different theoretical understanding of leadership. Furthermore, we posit that such an anthropological scan would highlight that leadership is, and has always been, a relational phenomenon. Hence the key challenge for today's leaders is to revert back to this traditional relational way of leading by letting go of any habits which have their genesis in theoretical premises formed only last century.





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