

POST-HEROIC LEADERSHIP IN AN AGE OF SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP**William J. Jones Ph.D**

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ABSTRACT

This analysis examines the shift from control-oriented leadership to sustainable, post-heroic models necessitated by modern hyperglobalization. The paper advocates for a honeybee approach, which prioritizes the triple bottom line and systemic resilience to ensure long-term organizational health. By adopting a process-centric framework, the leader's role transitions from a central commander to a moderator who coordinates information from the organizational periphery. Ultimately, navigating the volatility of the twenty-first century requires the cultivation of managerial cognition and psychological safety to foster inclusive, burnout-resistant work cultures.

KEYWORDS: Post-heroic Leadership, Managerial Cognition, Leadership Sustainability, Taylorism, Hyperglobalization**INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary corporate landscape is no longer defined by the steady, predictable currents of the mid-twentieth century. Instead, modern organizations characterized by rapid-fire maneuvers, fleeting competitive advantages, and a relentless ubiquitous acceleration (Bauman, 2000). In this volatile environment, the traditional image of the leader as a solitary hero steering a ship through calm waters has become not only obsolete but potentially dangerous. As the following analysis will explore, the survival of the firm now depends on a fundamental shift from leader-centric control to a more nuanced, process-centric management model rooted in sustainability and systemic resilience.

To understand where leadership is going, one must first establish what it fundamentally is. Despite the proliferation of theories, most academic discourse converges on a framework involving three critical elements: the leader, the follower, and the situation (Yukl, 2010). Historically, the trait approach dominated, suggesting that leadership was an innate quality of Great Men who possessed superior charisma or intelligence (Northouse, 2010). This evolved into the behavior approach, which sought to codify specific actions that lead to success, and eventually into contingency theory, which posits that the most effective leadership style is dependent on the specific context of the organizational environment (Pierce & Newstrom, 2011).

However, as the following sections detail, even these sophisticated contingency models often suffer from a lingering illusion of control. This legacy of Taylorism the belief that efficiency is a direct byproduct of top-down command remains a ghost in the machine of modern management (Van Greunen & Venter, 2022). In a hypercompetitive world, this rigid adherence to control often results in "locust" management: a short-term, extractive approach that prioritizes immediate financial gains at the expense of long-term organizational health (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011).

The emerging paradigm of sustainable leadership offers a necessary corrective. By shifting focus toward the triple bottom line balancing economic, social, and environmental goals—firms move from the destructive locust model toward a honeybee approach (Liao, 2022). This transition is not merely ethical; it is a strategic imperative. Research indicates that sustainable practices, supported by psychological safety and inclusive leadership, are essential to preventing the toxic work cultures that lead to burnout and human capital erosion (Rezaei & Karikalan, 2023).

Furthermore, the complexity of late modernity demands what has been termed post-heroic leadership (Handy, 1990). In this model, the leader is no longer the central commander but a moderator or sense-maker who coordinates information from the organizational periphery (Baecker, 2011). This decentralization of power acknowledges that no single individual can process the sheer volume of data generated by a globalized economy. As Shang et al. (2010) argue, the ultimate source of advantage lies in managerial cognition—the ability to cultivate mental frameworks that embrace contingency rather than attempting to suppress it. The following discussion synthesizes these themes, tracing the evolution from the rigid structures of the past to the fluid, sustainable, and empowering leadership models required to navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century.

Methodology: Leadership in Post Taylorist Systems

Complementing these strategic maneuvers, Parayre and Hurry (2001) utilize evolutionary game theory to demonstrate that real options investments provide superior long-term stability compared to static acquisitions, framing hypercompetition as a manageable phenomenon through meta-strategies. Černý et al. (2026) operationalize hypercompetition and posit that competitive intelligence must mature from a linear function into a core dynamic capability, allowing firms to sense and seize advantages within a six-stage maturity model. However, the internal cost of these external maneuvers cannot be ignored; Rezaei and Karikalan (2023) warn that hypercompetitive work cultures often become toxic, eroding human capital. They argue that inclusive leadership and psychological safety are essential interventions to prevent the mass burnout and turnover often associated with high-pressure environments.

The shift toward sustainable leadership represents a paradigm change from leader-centric to process-centric management. Liao (2022) highlights this evolution, noting that the field has matured into a distinct paradigm that addresses the 'triple bottom line' of economic, social, and environmental goals. This is further refined by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), who contrast the short-term 'locust' approach with the stakeholder-oriented 'honeybee' approach, arguing that the latter is a prerequisite for genuine business resilience. To bridge the gap between theory and practice, Tideman et al. (2013) synthesize insights from neuroscience and behavioral economics to identify the specific 'leadership mind-sets' required for this transition, while Çayak and Çetin (2018) provide a validated 36-item scale to measure sustainable behaviors across managerial, economic, cultural, and social dimensions.

The success of these sustainable models often depends on the intersection of individual traits and organizational structures. Shang et al. (2010) argue that 'managerial cognition,' the internal mental framework of leaders, is the ultimate source of sustainable advantage in hypercompetition. While Dalati (2015) suggests that universally endorsed traits like visionary and charismatic leadership remain essential, Durst et al. (2020) use Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis to show that sustainable leadership is not merely top-down; they find that employee integrity is a universally necessary condition for these practices to succeed.

Empirical research consistently links these leadership paradigms to tangible performance outcomes. Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016) provide robust evidence that a holistic suite of sustainable practices significantly correlates with improved financial returns and resilience. The mechanisms of this impact are further clarified by Burawat (2019), who identifies lean manufacturing as a partial mediator between transformational leadership and sustainability performance. Furthermore, Iqbal et al. (2020) demonstrate that the positive effects of sustainable leadership are amplified by psychological empowerment and organizational learning.

Conceptualizing Leadership: A Framework of Actors, Situations, and Historical Approaches

The art of leadership explains the ways in which an organization can be controlled, its members coordinated, and its given goals attained. However, as in many theoretical realms, definitions of leadership are numerous; there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it (Northouse, 2010). In order to provide a coherent approach to leadership, a general framework must be applied.

This framework provides a fundamental notion of leadership and, therefore, can encompass virtually all leadership theories developed to date. It relies on three basic elements inherent in every leadership theory: a person who leads, a subordinate who follows, and a situation in which the involved parties interact (Yukl, 2010). While this concept appears quite simple, it facilitates a clear understanding of the differences between leadership theories. Depending on the theory, theoretical emphasis is usually placed on one of these three aspects in particular. Each dimension will be considered separately.

The first dimension, which has attracted leadership theorists since the beginning, is the personality of the leader. Leadership, as suggested by the trait approach, is executed by individuals possessing very specific personality features. Due to their charismatic, intellectual, rhetorical, and organizational excellence, leaders are able to influence others. Indeed, this concept of the charismatic leader has dominated most of the history of leadership studies (Judge, Piccolo & Kosalka, 2009). Only recently have doubts regarding this assumption become impossible to ignore. Nevertheless, many leadership theories still focus on the particular attributes of leaders. In the third part of this paper, it will be revealed that this premise is not completely false; however, it must be considered very differently than how it was suggested throughout most of leadership theory's history. What leadership theories most frequently focus on are the personal traits and skills of leaders (Toegel & Barsoux, 2012). Theorists measure the impact of leaders' behavior, as well as the extent to which their behavior is trained, learned during childhood, or predetermined by genetic factors (Chaturvedi et al., 2012). Furthermore, the use of power, influence, and manipulation are central to leadership theories that focus on the leader (Pitesa & Thau, 2013). Because these relational categories create an impact that leaders exercise over others, theories eventually began to shift their focus toward followers.

Secondly, framing leadership as an interaction between leaders and followers (or subordinates) gave rise to theorizing about followers' motives and the effects that leaders exert upon them. For most of the history of leadership theory, the disposition of followers was of no importance. They were often viewed as passive entities

who needed to be manipulated and controlled by leaders, lacking the ability to express their own personalities. In the second half of the twentieth century, this perspective changed due to the group- and interaction-focused leadership theories developed during the 1960s and 1970s (Engstrom, 1978). While leader-centric approaches focus on a leader's strategies to influence others and the attributions they impose on followers, follower-centric theories examine the attitudes, needs, and degree of trust followers have in their leaders (Yukl, 2010). Job satisfaction becomes a critical metric in this respect, as business leadership is deeply embedded within the motivational and organizational structures of today's capitalist society.

The third aspect concerns the specific situation in which leadership is executed. Depending on the respective theory, the description of such a situation can be extremely complex (Manning & Curtis, 2009). Consequently, since the integration of leadership situations into theoretical frameworks, the associated concepts and categories have become increasingly intricate. Situations are usually differentiated by factors such as the size of the organizational unit, the position and authority of the leader, the specific tasks involved and their demands, the organizational culture (both in terms of heritage and hierarchies), the prevalence of teamwork, and the degree of employee autonomy. Even broad societal norms and global processes influence leadership situations (Yukl, 2010). While these influences illustrate the sheer complexity of leadership situations, they do not inherently explain the evolution of leadership theories. Thus, a historical overview of leadership theory is necessary.

Leadership theory that dominated until after World War II can largely be categorized under the trait approach. The traits, characteristics, values, and skills of leaders sit at the center of these theories (Northouse, 2010). However, fundamental questions still exist as to whether there was any universal set of traits separating leaders from non-leaders; this approach was slowly replaced by the behavior approach (Manning & Curtis, 2009). The behavior approach (or style approach) still focuses on the leader, but instead of searching for innate traits, it attempts to anticipate leadership success by identifying behavioral patterns (Northouse, 2010). With the subsequent power-influence approach, the interaction between leaders and followers became significantly important for the first time in leadership theory (Nye, 2010). Yet, it was only the situational approach that fully acknowledged all three aspects of leadership explained above. This approach soon expanded into several sub-approaches, the most famous being the contingency approach (Pierce & Newstrom, 2011). Within situational frameworks, the contextual conditions under which leadership is exercised are regarded as highly influential. Due to the dynamic nature of real-world situations, the static models proposed by the trait and behavior approaches are insufficient for grasping contingency theory and practice. Consequently, more dynamic theoretical situations became the focal point of modern leadership styles, as they are flexible enough to adapt to complex environments. Contingency models suggest that there is no single "best" style of leadership. Successful and enduring leaders utilize various styles according to the nature of the situation and the specific followers involved (Gill, 2011). Under this premise, the ideal leader is one who knows exactly which style to choose for a specific purpose, tailored to the particular followers they are addressing (Northouse, 2010).

The Illusion of Control and the Need for a New Leadership Paradigm

What has been explained thus far broadly summarizes the development of leadership theory up to the present. If this current state of research is applied to the concept of hypercompetition introduced at the beginning of this paper, a certain persistence across all these different approaches becomes apparent. Although leadership theories now include situational constraints, acknowledge the varying characteristics of leaders and followers, and even attempt to incorporate contingency into their frameworks, an unaltered focus on leaders and their ability to choose among styles and techniques remains undeniable. It appears that leadership theory has not yet completely overcome the paradigm of individual control that Frederick Winslow Taylor famously established in the late nineteenth century (Van Greunen & Venter 2022; Wohland & Wiemeyer, 2006). His influential idea that success stems from efficiency and that efficiency depends on control still permeates leaders' minds. This persists despite the fact that late modernity—which has led to globalization and ubiquitous acceleration—has recently and drastically changed the conditions under which economic leadership takes place (Bauman, 2000).

However, it would be naïve and superficial to blame leadership theory for neglecting current societal, political, and economic dynamics. The crucial importance of leadership for any organization, as stressed at the beginning of this paper, provides immense motivation to seek principles that extract leadership from the chaotic realm of contingency. Precisely because contingency is omnipresent, leadership theory attempts to preserve the idea of control and provide a safe harbor for organizations seeking stability. Yet, this understandable endeavor is doomed to fail. Leadership theory heads into a dead end if it attempts to deny the unpredictable power of contingency. Today, the traditional concept of absolute control is no longer viable; a new approach to leadership is required, yet only a few theories provide an adequate answer.

Identifying Sustainable Leadership in a Post-Taylorist Environment

Once the idea that resources such as human beings, the biophysical environment, and opportunities for future generations ought to be preserved is accepted as a basis for sustainable and trustworthy economic operations, the problem remains of how large organizations, such as multinational corporations, can practically bring this idea to life. Because leadership is pivotal to the behavior of large-scale organizations, the question emerges as to how leadership can be executed under the premise of sustainability. The solution, as previously mentioned, is called post-heroic leadership (Baecker, 2011). It invokes a systems theory background and proposes a theoretical model that intentionally disempowers the traditional leader. The term 'post-heroic' was introduced by Charles Handy in the 1980s (Handy, 1990). He recognized that under modern conditions, rational control over the trajectories of organizational development was no longer possible. In a way, however, post-heroic leadership suffers from the same flaw as many other leadership theories in that it remains inherently focused on the leader. Yet, in this instance, the theory centers on the decentralization of power. Post-heroic management argues against conceiving of leaders as heroes, suggesting instead that they be viewed as moderators whose role is to coordinate the information circulating around the organizational peripheries. What exactly is meant by this abstract expression?

In conventional theories, leaders are acknowledged as the center of their organizations. From there, they make contact with the organization's periphery. This periphery might be a front-desk employee interacting with customers, an engineer servicing a machine or inventing new products, or a sales manager in the distribution department.

Conclusion

The evolution of leadership theory demonstrates a necessary movement away from the rigid structures of Taylorism toward fluid and sustainable models. Traditional approaches rooted in individual control have become insufficient in an era of hyperglobalization and relentless acceleration. While historical trait and behavior approaches focused on the leader as a solitary hero, modern volatility requires a post-heroic paradigm.

This model redefines the leader as a moderator who coordinates information from the organizational periphery rather than acting as a central commander. Central to this transition is the adoption of the honeybee approach, which prioritizes systemic resilience and the triple bottom line over short-term gains. This balance of economic, social, and environmental goals is no longer merely an ethical choice but a strategic imperative for long-term organizational health.

The research underscores that the success of these models depends on cultivating managerial cognition, which allows leaders to embrace environmental contingency rather than attempting to suppress it. Furthermore, fostering inclusive leadership and psychological safety is essential to preventing the toxic work cultures and mass burnout associated with hyperglobalization. By shifting from a leader-centric to a process-centric framework, organizations can better navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the integration of sustainable practices and decentralized power structures provides a robust foundation for genuine business resilience and improved financial performance.

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