Leader emergence: the development of a theoretical framework

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework to explain how leaders emerge in teams that lack a hierarchical structure. This framework emphasizes the perceptual processes through which team members determine whether or not an individual fits with the task, the group, and the situational context.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper builds on prior leadership research to develop a theoretical framework of emergent leadership, a testable model, and research propositions.

Findings – The authors suggest that team members’ perceptions of leadership fit depend on the potential leader’s domain competence, fluid intelligence, willingness to serve, credibility, and goal attainment. A conceptual framework is developed to suggest these attributes combine to create perceptions of leadership fit that must correspond to the degree of stress in the situational context, which varies according to task criticality and time compression. The framework suggests that an individual perceived by team members to exhibit characteristics that fit with the situation will likely emerge as the leader.

Research limitations/implications – This paper focuses on emergent leadership, but does not address which path to leadership may be best. Future research may also address group dynamics (i.e. cohesion or group potency) and the implications for leader emergence.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the discipline by suggesting a potential path of leader emergence in multiple contexts of situational stress and leader behaviors.

Keywords Leadership, Leader emergence, Cognitive resource theory, Leader behaviours, Leadership fit, Situational stress

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Tiger, one day you will come to a fork in the road. If you go [one] way, you can be somebody [but] you will have to make compromises […] Or you can go [another] way and you can do something […] but you won’t have to compromise yourself […] To be somebody or to do something […] Which way will you go? (Col. John Boyd to a promising, young Air Force captain (Coram, 2002)).

How, precisely, do aspiring leaders ascend to leadership roles? There seem to be three paths to leadership in organizational contexts ignoring heredity (e.g. Charles, Prince of Wales) and coups (Castro’s overthrow of Batista): appointment, election, and emergence. Appointment presumes selection by senior managers or commanders based on a complex
interaction of situational need, demonstrated competence, candidate potential, or developmental opportunity (Bass, 1990; Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2001). Election represents a deliberate decision by a group with some form of governance structure in which a functional majority chooses an aspirant (Hollander and Julian, 1969; Lester et al., 2002). Appointment and election are reasonably well-understood phenomena with significant support in extant literature. Emergence is a much messier construct and represents the overarching question for this inquiry: what predicts leader emergence?

Leadership emergence appears particularly difficult to predict in groups that lack hierarchical structure and a history of interaction among members. When a group decides to work collaboratively to achieve a shared goal, the optimal choice among leader candidates may not be obvious. The purpose of this research is to understand leader emergence in situations where neither designation by senior management nor election by team members occurs. To explain this phenomenon, a theoretical framework is developed to explicitly examine leader emergence in a team context that lacks hierarchical structure. For the purposes of this research, leader emergence is defined as the ascension of a leader in a team with no formal mechanism to appoint or elect a leader. This paper contributes to this important domain by reviewing the relevant literature, offering a theoretical framework of leader emergence, proposing a testable model, developing a set of probative research propositions, articulating a set of limitations, exploring implications for organizational and individual users, and suggesting directions for future research.

Literature review
This challenge starts by reviewing a voluminous body of literature, extracting those constructs that add value to this inquiry, and using those constructs to build a theoretical framework that predicts leader emergence. Toward that end, relevant perspectives on emergent leadership, perception, cognitive resource theory (CRT), and charisma are introduced as elements of an overarching framework.

Emergent leadership
Taggar et al. (1999) suggest that the central role of leadership takes the form of facilitating team processes. Individuals who assume a leadership role by appointment or election possess some form of legitimate power (French and Raven, 1959). Alternatively, emergent leaders are defined as group members who possess no formal authority, yet exert significant influence over other group members (Schneider and Goktepe, 1983).

Individuals become members of a group as an act of social identification, and a group may range in size from two people who interact directly to affiliation with a nation state (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Although all teams are groups, teams differ from groups in that teams have a shared goal or activity that requires a collaborative effort (Yukl, 2010). Leaders may emerge in a collaborative team context in ways that differ from a group context, that is, one in which members may combine their individual work products to accomplish a group goal. Accordingly, the scope of this theoretical development is limited to leader emergence in teams.

Team members’ information processing and perceptions of leader fit
Central to theoretical development of the leader emergence phenomenon is the notion that “the team” (those who would be led) evaluates candidates, develops perceptions of the aspirants, and either supports or opposes an individual’s emergence to a leadership role (Taggar et al., 1999). Though we may discern articulated criteria that influence
some perceptions such as elimination by aspect (Tversky, 2004), information processing depends on heuristics that simultaneously reduce cognitive demands while yielding reasonable, though suboptimal, social judgments (Lord, 1985, p. 89).

Each individual on a team forms perceptions of various team members as potential leaders of the team, and these perceptions play a disproportionate role in the ascension of leaders. Perception represents an interaction of an environmental object or event with a schema that is internal to a perceiver (Lord, 1985, p. 93). Schema may be event based, namely, a sequence of actions that facilitate goal attainment, or it may be person-based, explicitly, a focus on behaviors or attributes that define either a prototype or an exemplar (Lord, 1985, p. 94). Both types of schemas likely contribute to leader emergence in teams. For example, an individual could become perceived as the team’s leader by developing an agenda for team meetings, acquiring essential resources for the team, solving critical problems, or by effectively framing or reframing the team’s purpose and goals (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996).

However, a clear understanding of how individual decision-makers develop heuristics, which are idiosyncratic, is simply unachievable. Team members’ perceptions of leader fit are multi-dimensional and represent the primary mechanism through which an individual emerges to a position or role as leader of a team. To develop perceptions, team members charged with evaluating leader candidates are simultaneously exposed to the behaviors of multiple individuals, complex tasks, and environmental information, all filtered through their own life experiences (Lord, 1985, p. 92). To be sure, we may understand selective processes. Lord’s (1985) conceptualization of prototypes is a useful example; perceivers may label or encode a person as a leader because they observe behaviors or characteristics that “fit” the category. However, data on which team members make decisions will be imperfect (i.e. flawed, incomplete, or untimely), all decision makers suffer from cognitive limitations, and decision makers often satisfice (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992; March and Simon, 1958).

**CRT**

CRT serves as an excellent foundation for the development of a theoretical framework to explain leader emergence. It suggests that team effectiveness may be enhanced if a selection process yields a leader who possesses expertise and experience, group support is high, and interpersonal stress is low (Vecchio, 1990). There are, however, significant points of departure between CRT and our proposed framework of leader emergence.

The first would be different conceptualizations of leader attributes. CRT considers follower perceptions of a leader’s intelligence and experience (Vecchio, 1990). We see value in both constructs, but we declare intelligence to be “fluid” rather than general and re-define experience as domain competence (a Bayesian perspective). Moreover, we augment these two perceptions with follower assessments of willingness to serve, credibility, and goal attainment. Our extended view of leader attributes is supported by the literature and takes a more holistic approach than CRT.

The second major difference is the conceptualization of stress, a construct that admittedly casts a very-wide net. As conceptualized in CRT, stress is limited to interactions between a leader and team members. Lee-Bagley et al. (2005) suggest that stress may be dichotomized into problem-focussed stress (e.g. work-related demands) or emotion-focussed stress (conflict/tension arising from social relationships). Kouzes and Posner (2002, p. 221) acknowledge the role of stress in organizational contexts, and propose a set of coping strategies described as psychological hardiness that would
permit aspiring leaders to “transform stressful events into manageable or desirable situations.” Whether arising from job demands or interpersonal relationships, stress seems to be a gap phenomenon, namely, the perceived gap between what an organizational actor is expected to do and that actor’s assessment of what is achievable. To be sure, stress exists bi-directionally in the chain of command: upward in the form of accountability to senior managers or commanders and downward in the form of accountability to subordinates. However, if an aspirant has not yet ascended to a leadership role, there can be no social stress attributable to accountability to superiors or subordinates.

This research conceptualizes stress as situational, rather than interpersonal, and argues that it takes one of two forms. Stress may come from severe, time compressions or criticality of task (Kerr et al., 1974). For example, trauma surgeons likely experience significantly more time-compressed stress to assess, decide, and act than dermatologists. Alternatively, situational stress may arise from the criticality of a task. Flight operations on a carrier deck likely create significantly more situational stress than stocking an end-aisle display in a grocery store.

Finally, the focal outcome variables in this research differ significantly from traditional CRT research. A key tenet of CRT posits that leader intelligence and experience interact with social stress to influence decision quality (Vecchio, 1990). While that relationship may be true, the question is outside the scope of inquiry for this research. Instead, leader emergence is the focal outcome or dependent variable for this research.

Charisma does not live here

We are struck by the broadly held view that charisma is a central feature of leadership (Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Tichy and Devanna, 1986); we are not as sanguine. Greek in origin, the translation of charisma is “gift from the gods” (Yukl, 2010). Charismatic leadership has a long history in leader ascension. Weber (1947) argues that a charismatic leader may emerge during a crisis by offering a compelling vision that galvanizes followers. A related argument comes from Shamir and Howell (1999), who invoke a stage model and argue that charisma operates at early stages (e.g. a new-venture's launch) and at late stages (e.g. a crisis) of an organization’s life cycle. Both cases suggest that followers may perceive articulated visions as achievable and leaders as exceptional.

The root of charisma is charm, which is typically manipulative. Though charm may take many forms, it seems irrefutable that charmers actively seek to exchange insincerity for personal gain. The use of charisma as a tool of oppression is well-documented (Conger, 1990; Kets de Vries, 1993; Stone et al., 2004). Charisma is always based on follower attributions, which are often emotive and may be fundamentally flawed (Conger and Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977). It may be based on some form of impression management, which is vacuous at best and disingenuous at worst (Higgins et al., 2003). Charisma is the polar opposite of transformational leadership; charisma creates and perpetuates dependency, whereas transformational leadership develops and empowers collaborators (Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2010). Moreover, charisma almost always polarizes followers when manifest in large-group contexts (Bass, 1985). We see value in using high-visibility, charismatic leaders to explicate polarization but recognize that any such example has the potential to trample sensitivities. With a view toward mitigating that outcome, we shall declare our criteria for selection. The first criterion is that the chosen leaders must be broadly regarded as charismatic. Second, each must be well-known on the World stage; it would be ineffectual to select examples of charismatic leaders who
may be parochial or obscure. Third, those chosen must indeed be polarizing, which is a central point about charisma in large-group contexts. Finally, we affirm that our perceptive is apolitical. Those disparate criteria converge on two recent US presidents – Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. It would be accurate to say that many Americans idolize both; it would be equally as accurate to say that many Americans abhor the worldviews of these two men. Charisma may play well in political arenas where perceptions are often based on scripted, superficial, public appearances. However, political leaders are chosen by election, which falls outside the scope of this inquiry. Though there are theorists who believe that charisma may predict leader ascension, we are hostile to its inclusion and follow Taggar et al. (1999, p. 917) as they assert that team members chose leaders based on the members’ collective assessment of a core set of characteristics that predict effective leadership.

**Theoretical framework**

This research aims to develop a theoretical framework to predict leader emergence. It shows a clear lineage to CRT (i.e. stress, experience, intelligence), though there are substantive differences that have been introduced. The theoretical framework proposed in this research suggests that the “interaction of perceived leadership fit with situational stress predicts leader emergence.” The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1 and will be developed throughout this section.

*Perceived leadership fit*

Perceived leadership fit represents our synthesis of the literature and is made up of five attributes: priors/domain competence; intelligence; willingness to serve; credibility; and goal attainment. We recognize that these attributes represent a mix of traits and behaviors, so a declaration of purpose and scope seems essential. This theoretical development does not argue in support of measuring individual, leader candidates’ traits, but rather focusses on team-member perceptions of leader candidates’ traits and behaviors, a distinction that is non-trivial. The remainder of this section develops each of these constructs and suggests related research propositions to build the theoretical framework.

*The roles of priors, judgment, and domain competence.* Bayes’ rule proposes that informative, prior experience interacts with current data to provide an accurate assessment of probability (Chen and Moore, 1985). The Bayesian perspective classifies

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**Figure 1.**

Theoretical framework of leader emergence
all priors into two, discrete categories: diffuse and informative (Gardenfors and Sahlin, 1988). Diffuse priors are uninformative, that is, an actor does not possess sufficient, domain knowledge to accurately interpret data and decide on an optimal course of action. Alternatively, informative priors typically facilitate accurate assessment and enactment of an optimal solution.

The construct of judgment suggest a similar interaction of experience with behavior. Simon (1987) defines judgment as pattern recognition, explicitly, a process of recognition and retrieval informed by experience. We can reasonably predict that 16-year-old drivers will be involved in more at-fault automobile accidents than 35-year-old drivers; two decades of driving experience likely capture most of that variance. Thus, informative priors and judgment converge on the same attribute: high-quality, decision making is informed by an experiential component.

The significance of domain competence cannot be overlooked. We propose that team members make assessments of all aspiring leaders’ domain competence and that those assessments influence leader emergence. These assessments may take a variety of forms – years of industry experience, prior success, broadly acknowledged expertise, achieved rank, and other measures.

Intelligence. Theorists have long-believed that intelligence (commonly noted as $g$ to represent general cognitive ability) predicts success in leadership roles (Rubin et al., 2002). However, there is substantial, empirical evidence that reports non-significant relationships between leader intelligence and performance (for a review see Gibson et al., 1993). An even-greater dilemma confronts practitioners; it is improbable that team members in any context would have $g$ scores for a pool of candidates.

Relatedly, scores on $g$, however, derived and disseminated, might answer the wrong question. Vecchio (1990) argues that any general measure of intelligence would be too simplistic to use to evaluate a potential leader; rather, he points to Sternberg’s (1985) work, which suggests that intelligence should be disaggregated into three component parts: problem solving, social judgment, and creativity. This view of practical intelligence is captured by the concept of fluid intelligence, which is defined as the ability to solve novel problems or detect patterns in novel or ambiguous stimuli (Fiedler, 1986; Gibson et al., 1993).

Absent objective measures, team members revert to perceptions to guide leader selection. Rubin and colleagues offer an insight on emergence that resonates: “When followers perceive that an individual possesses traits that match the followers’ leadership prototypes […] these traits are used as benchmarks for deciding emergent leadership” (Rubin et al., 2002, p. 106).

Willingness to serve. Kotter (1990) asserts that the first step in the process of leadership is the articulation of a vision. Any such declaration may be interpreted as a willingness to act, to serve, to lead. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991, p. 51) share a convergent view and argue that leaders are proactive, explicitly, they take action rather than simply reacting to events. Moreover, we believe that team members capably discern the difference between a potential leader’s biases to invoke personal or socialized power (McClelland, 1975). Though few behavioral constructs may be universally characterized as “good” or “bad,” a leader invoking socialized power subordinates self to a collective good, which is always virtuous, and a leader invoking personalized power reveals self-interest, which borders on evil. Indeed, we chose the epigram attributed to Col. John Boyd explicitly because it suggests that to subordinate self to achieve a worthy, collective goal is vastly preferable to acting in self-interest. In Boyd’s words, the choice is to do or to be.
Authentic leadership is an emergent construct that has value in this context. Though there is definitional dissensus, Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 94) propose a definition of authentic leadership: a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes positive, psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, fosters self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers. The literature on authentic leadership explores the duality of practical and theoretical perspectives (Northouse, 2010), constructs that dovetail with willingness to serve.

We are ever mindful of the paradox that to lead is to serve. How do collaborators perceive willingness to serve? We believe that team members’ assessments of an aspiring leader’s traits and behaviors on this dimension may in part predict ascension/selection.

Credibility. The trust literature is rich and substantial. Our objective is to distill trust into discrete phenomena that may be operationalized in the domain of leader ascension/selection. Credibility is thought to be a subclass of trust and is defined as a perceiver’s assessment of believability, specifically, that a speaker’s words will be a reliable guide to his or her behavior (O’Keefe, 1990). Drilling deeper, behavioral integrity is an antecedent of trust and may be defined as alignment of words and deeds (Simons, 2002, p. 18).

The distinction between behavioral integrity and credibility is that behavioral integrity is backward looking, whereas credibility is forward looking (Simons, 2002). Behavioral integrity is directly observable. We compare an actor’s words with his actions: promises kept suggest wholeness, which is the fundamental element of integrity; promises broken do not. Credibility, then, is an extension of behavioral integrity. If team members observe an actor and see alignment of words and deed, they may rely on that history and perceive an aspiring leader’s promises to be credible.

Thus, we argue for a sequence of perceptions in this assessment of fit. Behavioral integrity is a facilitating condition for credibility because it establishes a pattern of behavior. Once behavioral integrity has been established, credibility is then a necessary condition for leader emergence because the aspiring leader’s message meets the standard of believability.

Goal attainment. Value congruence may be defined as the compatibility of an individual’s beliefs and values with the organization’s cultural values (Sitkin and Roth, 1993). Accordingly, we believe that the congruence of values and goals significantly influences followers’ perceptions of fit or suitability to assume a leadership role. It is therefore incumbent on aspiring leaders to make declarations that permit collaborators’ assessments. Simons observes: “Without core beliefs […] would-be leaders will be judged as inconsistent and will be derided for being ‘political’ in their behavior. The first step on the credibility journey is thus clarification of values” (2002, p. 31).

There is empirical evidence to suggest a link between transformational leadership and goal congruence. First credited to Burns (1978), a host of scholars have refined and extended the construct of transformational leadership so that it has achieved primacy in the leadership literature. Simplistically, it may be defined as a process of building commitment to organizational objectives and empowering collaborators to accomplish those objectives (Stone et al., 2004, p. 350). Transformational leaders earn collaborators’ trust and respect, which leads to shared values and willing acceptance of them as leaders (Jung and Avolio, 2000; Podsakoff et al., 1996).
Lord (1985, p. 102) argues that leadership perceptions are informed by the “recognition approach,” that is, team-member perceptions are based on direct contact with and observations of an aspiring leader’s behaviors, with primacy given to the accomplishment of organizational goals. If collaborators discern compatibility of goals and values, there is evidence to suggest that team members then make assessments of an aspirant’s skills and abilities before ceding power (Kristof, 1996; Rynes and Gerhart, 1990).

The sequence of leader emergence
Role development processes (Taggar et al., 1999) suggest that aspiring leaders exhibit leader behaviors once they discern expectations from fellow team members, thus creating an “informal hierarchy.” Seers et al. (1995, pp. 20-21) reinforce this perspective as they observe that this process aggregates perceptions of role-episode exchanges between group members and “a focal role occupant” leading to general role consensus within the team.

We believe that an event sequence precedes leader emergence, explicitly, that team members perform a series of assessments, often in real time, always with imperfect information, relying on individual coding schema. Moreover, we believe that team members adopt a single-elimination model, that is, if a candidate falls short of any standard, (s)he is dropped from the consideration set.

We assert that the demand-abilities perspective (Kristof, 1996) has primacy in team members’ assessment of fit. Explicitly, team members invoke this perspective to evaluate aspirants on two dimensions – domain competence and fluid intelligence. We would expect those judgments to be categorical: competent or not, sufficiently intelligent or not:

RP1a. Domain competence is a dimension of perceived leadership fit.

RP1b. Fluid intelligence is a dimension of perceived leadership fit.

Next, emergence must embrace the collaborators’ perception of the leader’s credibility (Simons, 2002). Likely, it would be based on the leader’s articulation of values that answer a fundamentally important question: does the aspiring leader’s vision (Kotter, 1990) match that of the team members?:

RP1c. Willingness to serve is a dimension of perceived leadership fit.

Goal attainment is the final dimension. Zaccaro et al. (1991) offer a partial explanation for emergence as they observe that emergent leaders may be more adept than other team members at perceiving team requirements and selecting contextually correct responses to extant demands:

RP1e. Goal attainment is a dimension of perceived leadership fit.
Thus, we propose that increases in each dimension will increase the likelihood of leader emergence:

\textbf{RP2.} An increase in the level of perceived leadership fit increases the probability of leader emergence.

\textit{Effective leader behaviors}

The Ohio State leadership studies provide a theoretical platform for examining effective leader behaviors. No scholarship escapes criticism, but the works of Fleishman (1953) and Halpin and Winer (1957) and their colleagues still resonate nearly 60 years later. Their empirical studies suggest that effective, leader behaviors take two, principal forms: the ability to initiate structure (often described as task behaviors) and consideration of subordinates (often described as relational behaviors). The Military has come to precisely the same conclusion; the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command teaches all small-unit leaders that they must focus on the well-being of their soldiers (relational behaviors) and the accomplishment of their mission (task behaviors) (Department of the Army Headquarters, 1990).

Viewed through this framework, effective leaders should aspire to be high on task and high on relational behaviors. Non-optimal leaders would be perceived as high-low, low-low, or low-high across these two dimensions.

\textit{Situational stress}

We present a theoretical framework in which stress is situational rather than interpersonal and argue that it may take the forms of time compression, criticality-of-task, or both.

\textit{Time compression.} There is significant evidence to support a negative relationship between speed and accuracy. Generally, as time to complete a task decreases, accuracy suffers (Ratcliff and McKoon, 1982; Salthouse, 1979). However, a growing body of research suggests that age or experience may moderate that relationship (Beilock et al., 2004). In terms of this research, this argument suggests that time compression typically creates a sense of urgency regarding whether to choose an emergent leader or to enact a decision. Clearly, there must be a balance between incisiveness and decision quality. Metaphorically, we do not argue that the selection of an emergent leader should follow a slap-leather-and-come-out-with-guns-blazing model. Indeed, a delightful bit of folk lore tells us that Wyatt Earp always took an extra half-second or so to aim at his opponents. That deliberate delay paid handsome dividends; a veteran of many gunfights, he was never wounded or defeated (Reilly, 2004). Urgency is but one source of time-related demands; other intraorganizational phenomena such as permissible error rates, task uncertainty, and role ambiguity create similar stresses (Kerr et al., 1974).

\textit{Criticality of task.} Criticality of task is believed to be an important dimension of task interdependence (Kiggundu, 1981). Not surprisingly, there is definitional dissensus. The Aston Group conceptualizes criticality as the speed and severity with which the workflows of a subunit affect the final output of an organization (Hickson et al., 1971). That perspective has great value, but it seeks to explicate structural sources of power, i.e. the strategic significance of a subunit relative to other functional areas within an organization. A more-contextually appropriate definition is offered by Bowers et al. (1994, p. 208), who define task criticality as the degree to which failure in the task causes negative outcomes.
Building on that dimension of adverse consequences, Kerr et al. (1974) conceptualize criticality as flowing from physical danger (e.g., air crews in combat). Yun et al. (2005) explore this construct with a study of the effectiveness of trauma teams. Thus, criticality-of-task touches countless, work-related domains – the production function in every for-profit company, the practice of medicine, commercial aviation, virtually everything done in military operations, and more:

RP3a. Under conditions of significant time compression, the relationship between perceived leadership fit and leader emergence will be strengthened.

RP3b. Under conditions of significant task criticality, the relationship between perceived leadership fit and leader emergence will be strengthened.

Interaction of situational stress and effective leader behaviors. The Ohio State University taxonomy of task and relational behaviors provides empirical support for an additional moderating variable. Taggar et al. (1999) find that emergent leaders exhibit high-order skills at task/initiating structure under conditions of situational stress, which suggests that relational/consideration behaviors may have less predictive value under conditions of situational stress. Stein and Heller (1979) provide convergent evidence as they report a weak relationship between relational behaviors and emergent leadership:

RP4a. Under conditions of significant time compression, aspiring leaders who exhibit high-order task behaviors will be more likely to emerge.

RP4b. In situations of task criticality, aspiring leaders who exhibit high-order task behaviors will be more likely to emerge.

Further, we see value in exploring a competing explanation. Specifically, if there is no time compression or if the task is noncritical, leader emergence may be driven by relational leader behaviors:

RP4c. If there is no situational stress, aspiring leaders who exhibit high-order relational behaviors will be more likely to emerge.

Theoretical implications
This research extends existing research on leader emergence and CRT by proposing a theoretical framework for explaining leader emergence in teams that lack hierarchical structure. This work contributes to existing theory and research in multiple ways. First, the theoretical framework developed suggests that leader emergence is in part predicted by team members’ perceptions of leadership fit, which is made up of five key dimensions – domain competence, intelligence, willingness to serve, credibility, and goal attainment. Extant research has not fully explored this multi-dimensional construct’s complexity, and therefore this research represents a first step in doing so. Second, this research suggests that the relationship between perceived leadership fit and leader emergence is not simply a direct relationship, but is moderated by situational stress and effective leader behaviors. This proposed relationship builds on the taxonomy of task and relational leader behaviors from Ohio State University to predict situations when specific types of leaders may emerge. Finally, this work
develops research propositions for future researchers to begin to test the proposed framework of leader emergence.

**Implications for practitioners**

Our objective in this endeavor is to develop and introduce an early-stage, theoretical framework, which identifies a set of variables that predict leader emergence in groups lacking structure. This construct must gain traction through theoretical extension and empirical examination. Not surprisingly, we are constrained by stage-of-development as we explore potential benefits to users.

Sequentially, the next step in this line of inquiry ought to be a measurement and modeling study. It is our intent to develop and validate an instrument. It is likely that we will use student samples in the early stages and refine the instrument in field studies. Once a validated instrument exists, we see the potential to benefit both organizations and individuals. If an instrument exists that predicts leader emergence, organizations could use it in at least two applications. The first would be as an assessment tool in the traditional recruitment/selection processes, namely, does a candidate exhibit leadership potential? The second assumes that an actor has already jumped over the hiring hurdle and has become an organizational member. Operating managers or human-resource specialists could use it as a tool to assess and assign promising employees to developmental roles. Leadership success rates should be enhanced if the instrument is efficacious. We recognize that either proposed use is a departure from the focal argument, that is, emergence in a leaderless group, but the promise for organizational benefit exists nonetheless. Similarly, individuals who aspire to leadership roles could use the instrument as a template for development.

What, specifically, are the attributes that predict selection as a leader? What skills must an aspirant master? What behaviors are likely to be perceived by collaborators (or superiors) as fitting a leader prototype? A validated instrument that predicts leader emergence should be a useful guide to answer these and related questions.

**Limitations**

All conceptual work suffers from underdevelopment. We shall identify a number of limitations to this research; doubtless, there are others that escape articulation. First, we study emergence not effectiveness. The former would be both perceptual and futuristic; the latter would focus on actual behaviors. We would expect to find interdependent relationships. Moreover, this study does not take up the challenge about which path to leadership may be best. There is neither empirical evidence nor a theoretical basis to declare emergence as superior to either appointment or election.

Further, this effort does not address group dynamics. For example, we have not considered the implications of cohesion or group potency on leader emergence. It is possible that differential measures on either construct could positively or negatively influence ascension. Similarly, does the team exist in a leaderless state? If the team exists, does it have history with the candidate(s)? Alternatively, did it naturally coalesce in response to a crisis? Separately, did an aspiring leader actively engage in its formation thus affecting recruitment, selection, and composition of team members?

Attributes of leader candidates likely play a disproportionate role in emergence, foreseeably creating at least two problems. All studies of emergence are perceptual
(Zaccaro et al., 1991); it follows that early-stage scholarship may operationalize leader attributes in ways that create dissonance. Moreover, is there a stage model that predicts ascension based on a set of traits or skills that may be specific to a team’s stage of development? We offer no such prescription. Finally, this study does not propose necessary or sufficient conditions for leader emergence but rather explores ascension that naturally occurs in organizational settings.

**Directions for future research**

The potential to extend this research is truly exciting. One approach would follow a somewhat traditional research agenda. The first step beyond this conceptual paper may be a qualitative study in which scholars explore and refine the phenomena of interest. Semi-structured interviews (McCracken, 1988) could be used to ensure the phenomenon of leader emergence is fully understood before the conceptual model is tested. Such interviews could be conducted with student teams or managers in an organizational team setting. Qualitative interviews are often used in early stages of research (Denzin, 1978) and could help researchers understand the main facets of each of the five dimensions of perceived leadership fit, in order to properly develop measurement scales and begin to test the proposed theoretical framework.

Next, the qualitative work could be followed by a measurement and modeling study in which scholars develop and validate an instrument to measure perceived leadership fit as a second-order construct. Thereafter, empirical examination using primary data should advance our understanding of the relationships between team members’ perceptions of leadership fit and leader emergence, and such relationship modified by situational stress and effective leader behaviors. Again, the theoretical framework posited in this paper could be empirically tested with a sample of students or managers working in teams without an appointed or elected leader. The overarching purpose of this stream would be to empirically test the leader emergence framework in the context of teams that lack hierarchical structure.

Additionally, a separate inquiry could differentially assess leader effectiveness as a function of the path to leadership role, whether by appointment, election, or emergence. Judge et al. (2002) offer guidance and propose that team task may be the best measure of leader effectiveness as results would be actual behaviors rather than collaborators’ perceptions. Clearly there will be confounds, but we have faith that intellectual rigor could be achieved. Researchers could turn to numerous studies that have measured leadership effectiveness, including Kayworth and Leidner (2002), who recently adapted a measurement scale from Denison et al. (1995) to test leadership effectiveness in global virtual teams.

Finally, we declared this work to be the development of a theoretical framework, which explicitly contemplates leader emergence in a group or team context that lacks hierarchical structure. We see genuine promise in extending this framework first to a limited-domain theory, then perhaps to different levels of analysis such as firm or inter-organizational levels. For example, this work may be combined with work in logistics and supply chain management to examine leader emergence in inter-organizational teams, where researchers have just begun to examine how firms emerge as supply chain leaders (Defee et al., 2010), but a framework is lacking to predict firm-level leader emergence beyond the relative coarseness of power and dependence relations. Perhaps an improved understanding of these emergent phenomena would extend to inter-organizational alliances.
Conclusion
We are both humbled and inspired by a declaration made by Kerr et al. (1974, p. 72) in their seminal article linking the Ohio State University studies on leader behaviors to a contingency theory of leadership:

It is conceptually and physically impossible to define and study all the important variables which comprise the “situation.” It is consequently necessary to select only those elements of the environment which are measurable, and which exert a strong effect upon the relationships.

Our goal has been to synthesize the literature and present a set of constructs that reliably predicts leader emergence in groups that lack hierarchical structure. We have augmented that theoretical framework with a testable model and research propositions. We extend that discussion to suggest precisely how the model may advance our understanding of leadership phenomena generally and leader emergence specifically. We explore the implications to practitioners, explicitly, how organizations and individuals may apply and benefit from this theoretical framework. We present a set of limitations that simultaneously suggests challenges to this research and suggests several, addressable questions. We close with specific thoughts on a multi-faceted research agenda: a qualitative study to refine the constructs; a measurement and modeling study to develop and validate an instrument; empirical examinations that would assess leader effectiveness linked to the path of ascension (whether by appointment, election, or emergence); and the study of complex, inter-organizational relationships such as leadership in the context of supply chain management. Theoretical refinement and empirical examination may validate this proposed framework and move it toward acceptance as a limited-domain theory. Alternatively, future examination may disconfirm our perspective. In either case, we are excited by future research opportunities in this domain.

References


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