

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

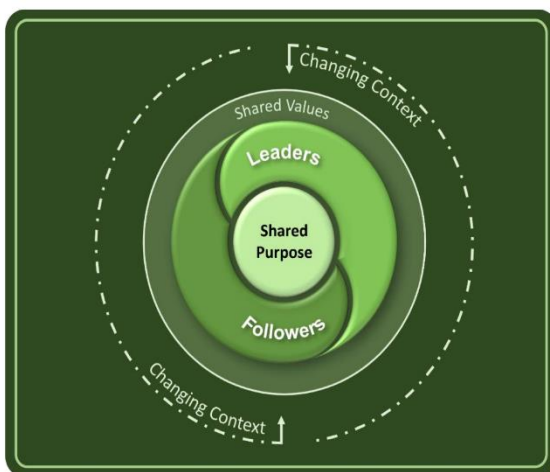
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Social Identity as an Essential Leadership Tool

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This paper briefly introduces a social identity theory of leadership, drawing together the Army Leadership Doctrine and the Followership Doctrine Note. It does so by exploring the instrumental and dynamic role played by the shared values and purpose in the British Army Leader-Follower Relationship Model. The explanatory power of a dual-agency model of leadership is explored to advance our understanding of followership and influence as drivers of individual and group behaviour.



The group within the individual

Psychology is the scientific study of human behaviour, and the basic unit of analysis is typically the individual. Social psychology is focused on understanding how individuals are affected by, and behave in, a social context. One of the most powerful developments within psychology in the twentieth century was social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which inverted this focus to examine *the group within the individual*, or how group memberships influence individual and collective behaviour.

Tajfel and Turner wanted to understand the division that has existed throughout human history between *us* and *them*, recognising it as the single greatest moral challenge to

psychology and the study of leadership. They rejected the prevailing view that crowds and groups rendered individuals “mindless and credulous”, positing instead that group behaviour was informed by the pre-existing norms, values, and beliefs that those individuals associate with, and derive from, membership of the group and that these norms, values and beliefs, in turn, were internalised as a core part of their social identity (Haslam, Reicher & Platlow, 2012). In this way, the theory alters the

standard emphasis within psychology on the self (as “me” and “I”) and instead argues that in a range of contexts we define ourselves through our social identity (as “we” and “us”).

The fundamental premise of social identity theory is that where the self is defined in terms of social identity, individuals will act to create and maintain the positivity and distinctiveness of their ingroup relative to other outgroups. In short, I want “us” (whoever we are) to be better than, and different from, them (whoever ‘they’ are). Now common sense in hindsight, this simple re-conceptualisation of human behaviour was a paradigm shift that advanced our understanding not only of the ‘dark side’ of social identity (prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping and their outcomes, ranging from workplace bullying and harassment to violence, human atrocities, and genocide) but also the ‘bright side’ of human interaction in groups (trust, cooperation, loyalty and leadership).

A false dichotomy: The significance of ‘the space between’ leadership and followership

For centuries scholars have centred their theories of leadership on the charisma, exceptionalism and resolve of the individual leader. In recent decades there has been widespread recognition of the limitations of this view, which has resulted in a more inclusive approach to the study of leadership that embraces – among other things – the concept of followership. Yet the enduring binary conceptualisation of leadership and followership represents a false dichotomy that belies the reciprocal influence or *dual agency* that leaders and followers exert on one another and neglects the inherently social phenomenon that unites and binds them: a sense of shared social identity.

The dual-agency theory argues that leaders are only able to exert influence over followers (that is, to lead) to the extent that they engage in *identity leadership*, where they are seen by those followers as an embodiment of “us”. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of 128 studies and over 30,000 participants across a wide array of different contexts and groups indicated that the ability of the leader to embody social identity explained more than four times as much variance in leader effectiveness than the next best individual-level predictor (Steffens et al., 2021).

When followers identify with their leaders and the cause that unites them, this sense of shared social identity is the genesis of *engaged followership*, where followers engage constructively and creatively with the ideas and vision of a leader in an effort to advance a positive notion of ‘us’. Evidence in a range of organisational, sporting and military contexts has also shown that engaged followership is a key determinant in accelerated and superior group performance (Haslam, 2004).

Why does social identity matter for leadership?

The dual agency model of leadership thus argues that effective leadership is grounded in the productive dynamic between identity leadership and engage followership and that this motivates leaders and followers to work together to “advance a sense of *us* as positive, distinctive, and enduring” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979 cited in Haslam et al. 2021). Specifically, the model has four components:

- **Being One of Us.** Effective leaders embody a social identity that they share with other group members, and it is this shared social identity that is a basis for the leader to exert influence. Leadership is therefore a dynamic process of social identity management in which the leader needs to represent a shared sense of ‘us’ by embodying ‘who we are’ and ‘what we want to be’. Along these lines, research undertaken with the Royal Marines (Peters & Haslam, 2018) showed that trainee officers were more likely to both emerge as leaders and be recognised as leaders by their peers when they acted in ways that demonstrated *interest in the group* and the *achievement of collective goals* rather than as stereotypical ‘leaders’ who were only interested in themselves.
- **Doing It for Us.** Leaders are more likely to inspire engaged followership if they are perceived to represent the interests of the group and to be working to enhance its reputation. Conversely, their potency as a leader will be compromised if they are seen to be acting out of self-interest or in ways that benefit other groups. For example, Haslam et al, (2021, drawing on Dening, 2002) noted the failure to advance the interests of the group as the ultimate downfall of Captain Bligh on board the infamous mutiny on *The Bounty*.
- **Creating a Sense of Us.** Successful leaders work hard to build and convey a sense of us, ensuring that, in the process, they are prototypical for the group. They therefore work hard to create a sense of inclusiveness and belonging in the group and to model a concern for ‘us’ rather than ‘me’. In part, this involves working with their groups to clarify shared values, norms and goals, rather than simply passing these down. In this way, leadership is about cultivating a sense of ‘us’ and empowering group members to be part of it.

- Making Us Matter. The final component of the dual-agency model involves the leader acting as an identity impresario, creating, sustaining, or embedding structures that allow group members to enact their social identity. This component ensures that the rhetoric of social identity (the *idea* of ‘us’) manifests itself in the lived experience of the members and consolidates a sense of positive group distinctiveness. Within the British Army this can be seen in such things as regimental colours, songs and customs as well as parades, community events, and wreath-laying ceremonies on Remembrance Sunday.



The four components of a dual-agency model of leadership¹

Van Dick and colleagues (2019; see also Bracht et al., 2023) describe programmatic research in more than 25 countries which has shown that these four components of the dual-agency model of leadership predict the ability of the leader to inspire engaged followership and to stimulate innovation and creativity in ways that are critical to the success and survival of the group.

The value of leadership

The dual-agency model of leadership asserts that leaders gain influence by framing the agency of their followers, allowing room for creativity and innovation in how collective goals are accomplished (Haslam et al 2021). Within the Army, this is immediately recognisable as delegated responsibility, mission command and empowerment. *Engaged followership* exists where followers exhibit their loyalty and attachment to the leader by working towards these goals in ways that in turn empower and legitimise the leader.

Given the primacy of self-identity in influencing the behaviour of group members, the dual-agency model predicts that followers will construe their actions as constructive and legitimate, contributing towards the realisation of group goals and the maintenance and advancement of positive group distinctiveness. Historical examples of leaders whose effective identity leadership was a catalyst for engaged followership and positive social change include Emeline Pankhurst, Martin Luther King Jr., and William Wilberforce.

However, the dual agency model is also able to explain historical events that are far more problematic — from the Holocaust and genocide in Darfur, to terrorism in the Middle East and otherwise unlawful acts of violence such as the assault on the US Capitol building. Indeed, a recent examination of the assault on the Capitol building through the lens of a dual-agency model of leadership poses some interesting questions of relevance to the prosecution of inappropriate behaviour, misdemeanour and unlawful killing in the military for misappropriation of delegated responsibility, mission command and empowerment: Precisely because engaged followership is creative (it does not involve followers blindly following orders), leaders are able to claim plausible deniability for the actions of their followers if the behaviour of the followers comes under scrutiny and renders them liable for prosecution.²

The distinction between *effective* leadership and *good* leadership is a historic, enduring, and compelling theme in leadership education and debate. Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2012: 215) assert that leadership is “most effective when it is successful in mobilising followers and wielding the group as a powerful social force; but it is only good if the mobilisation of that social force helps achieve laudable and desirable social outcomes.” Within the dual-agency framework, the key issue is one of identity *content*: Identity leadership will make groups effective, but whether they are the “right” things will depend upon the nature of the identity that followers choose to mobilise around. We see and understand the political tension surrounding these differences in world view within the

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² The dual-agency model of leadership as a tool for better understanding tyranny will be explored in more detail in a forthcoming RUSI paper.

United Nations, and more specifically surrounding the invasion of Ukraine and the attack on the Gaza strip.

Conclusion

Most influential models of leadership are normative: they describe preferred ways of engaging in leadership activities such as decision-making and group governance. These include authentic, distributed, ethical, inclusive and servant leadership. The dual-agency model is explanatory, providing useful insight into the dynamic interplay between leadership and followership. It serves to remind us of both the inherent limitations to heroic and romantic theories of leadership and the reductionist notion that leadership and followership are opposite sides of the same coin.

According to the dual-agency model, leaders both emerge and are effective by (a) behaving in a manner prototypical, or representative, of the group they seek to lead; (b) visibly and actively championing the interests of the group; (c) motivating followers to act in the interests of the group, and (d) actively shaping reality in the image of group through rites, symbols and rituals. When linked to the Army Leadership Doctrine and Followership Doctrine Note, the dual-agency model demonstrates the power of the shared psychological space that exists between leaders and followers; one that strengthens the bond between leader and follower. It also speaks to the essential nature of these processes for leadership: that *without* shared social identity there can *be* no leadership. A strong statement, but one upheld by an increasing body of evidence and one that highlights a clearer pathway to effective leadership and leadership education.

Questions

1. What implications does a dual-agency model of leadership have for Army Leadership and Followership doctrine and ethos?
2. What challenges and opportunities might a dual-agency model of leadership pose for diversity and inclusion?
3. How can a dual-agency model of leadership inform leadership development and selection?
4. What insights might a dual-agency model of leadership provide for investigations of inappropriate behaviour and misconduct?

Resources

[Army Followership Doctrine Note](#) (2023)

[Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021)

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