

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Potency, power and function leadership¹

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According to Hannah Arendt (2006), the progressive collapse of tradition and authority in democratic societies makes leadership unavoidable. Yet, authority and leadership account for radically different dynamics: authority imposes itself and does not need to convince whereas leadership always does. The process described by Arendt, affects all kinds of organisations even the most hierarchical ones, such as military institutions. As stated in the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021), leadership must be clearly defined as a process that brings together leaders and their teams to achieve a specific outcome or goal. This characterization must integrate the key role played by the follower in this process as there cannot be leaders without followers. According to current research, there are three main kinds of leadership that can be characterised based on their effects on followers: potency, power and function.

The literature review reveals as many definitions of leadership as there are leadership researchers. Despite this anthology, a consensus emerges: leadership is a process that relies on three key pillars: a leader, a follower and a context (Avolio et al. 2020). As a result, changing one of these three pillars modifies the character of leadership itself.

Until recently, the importance of the follower had been neglected by research and leadership theories due to a predominance of leader-centric approaches. Yet, studying leadership according to the nature of the transformations experienced by the follower is

¹ This *CAL Leadership Insight* is based on the research published by Dr Gabriel Morin and Professor Peter Stokes (2022).

crucial and deserves attention. This focus is at the top of the agenda of the Centre for Army Leadership as shown by the publication of the [A British Army Followership Doctrine Note](#) (2023) and by its 2023 annual conference dedicated to [Creating effective followership](#).

What are potency, power and function leadership?

Why does someone decide to follow someone who has been designated as a leader? Sometimes the act of followership is not linked to the leader themselves but to the organisational context. It comes from the function of the leader (for example an Army officer) and not the person (a specific individual). This suggests a form of bureaucratic authority. This type of leadership is more administrative and structured than strategic and interpersonal. We define it as *functional leadership*, which is the initial conceptualisation that will help to characterize leadership states according to the transformations that followers experience. Functional leadership resonates with the Army where leaders are often identified by their rank. The rank refers to the function, not the individual. When a soldier follows a superior only because of their rank, and not by personal conviction, the leader's authority is generated by the function (the rank) and not by the person who holds the function. This mechanism induces a form of bureaucratic authority that can raise disengaged leadership, i.e. a followership more administrative and bureaucratic than strategic and interpersonal (Bolden et al. 2009). While functional, this approach often results in the bare minimum effort of the part of the follower. Things do get done on time but there is no pro-active engagements, no sense of ownership.

According to Gilles Deleuze, the distinction between potency and power is key, and the confusion between the two terms is argued as being ruinous (2004). Potency is about giving and creating and not about wanting, coveting and looking after (Deleuze 2006). Potency thus transpires as mainly creative and supportive, i.e. the opposite of domination. Building on these conceptions, *potency leadership* may be defined as the ability of leaders to provide energy to the follower, to help them grow and become themselves leaders. Potency supports the conception whereby leadership aims to develop more leaders through followers. This development of the individual constitutes the primary affirmation of potency, which Deleuze (2006) terms the becoming. The becoming of the follower is not about imitating and copying behaviours and action but creating awareness, confidence and belief in her or his own potency (Deleuze 2006). Compared to the main other leadership theories, potency leadership is unique as it concerns follower growth, not performance, even though performance will be implicitly boosted by the individual's development (Morin & Stokes 2022). History teaches us that successful and famous army leaders are always the ones who transcend their own function to deploy potency leadership that go far beyond functional leadership (Clark 2022).

Finally, *power leadership* seems to be the opposite of potency leadership and aims at protecting the leader's power, preventing followers from growing, and keeping them in the *status quo* of their followership – an obstacle for the realisation of potency (Deleuze 2004). Power leadership, which can also be used against followers who might threaten the leader's position, is about domination and control. This is the opposite of potency leadership. For Deleuze, there is no bad potency: what is bad is the lowest degree of potency, and the lowest degree of potency is power (2004). Power consists, according to Deleuze, in preventing followers from realising their own potency, which is sadness. Joy is precisely the opposite, it is when someone explores one's own potency. Potency leaders drive their followers to this joyful destination. Potency leadership

mobilises active forces, such as autonomy, change, creation, energy, gift and growth whereas power leadership assembles reactive forces like conservatism, greed and politics (Deleuze 2006). Power leadership may also invoke the *dark triad* of the individual: machiavelism, narcissism and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams 2002). Machiavelism is about gaining power (or control) on someone by mobilizing dishonest (but smart) techniques; narcissism is an excess of self-esteem (attention and admiration) for one’s own aptitudes whereas psychopathy designates someone who is disconnected from other people, future and sense of responsibility. The [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021) indirectly deals with these categories when it describes toxic leadership (point 2-11 to 2-14) and quotes Richard Holmes’ *Ten Diseases of Leadership* (Appendix 1).

Potency leadership focuses on the followers; functional leadership overlooks them; power leadership despises them. Potency leadership is eminently personal, as defined by Field Marshall Bill Slim, ‘Leadership is the most personal thing in the world, for the simple reason that leadership is just plain you’ (1952). Power and functional leadership are impersonal. Power leadership refers to hierarchy and functional leadership to position.

Potency and power leadership could be positioned on the map of leadership styles, as developed through the literature review as showed in Fig 1. A revisited version of the mapping of leadership styles on the value-framework is provided as follows:

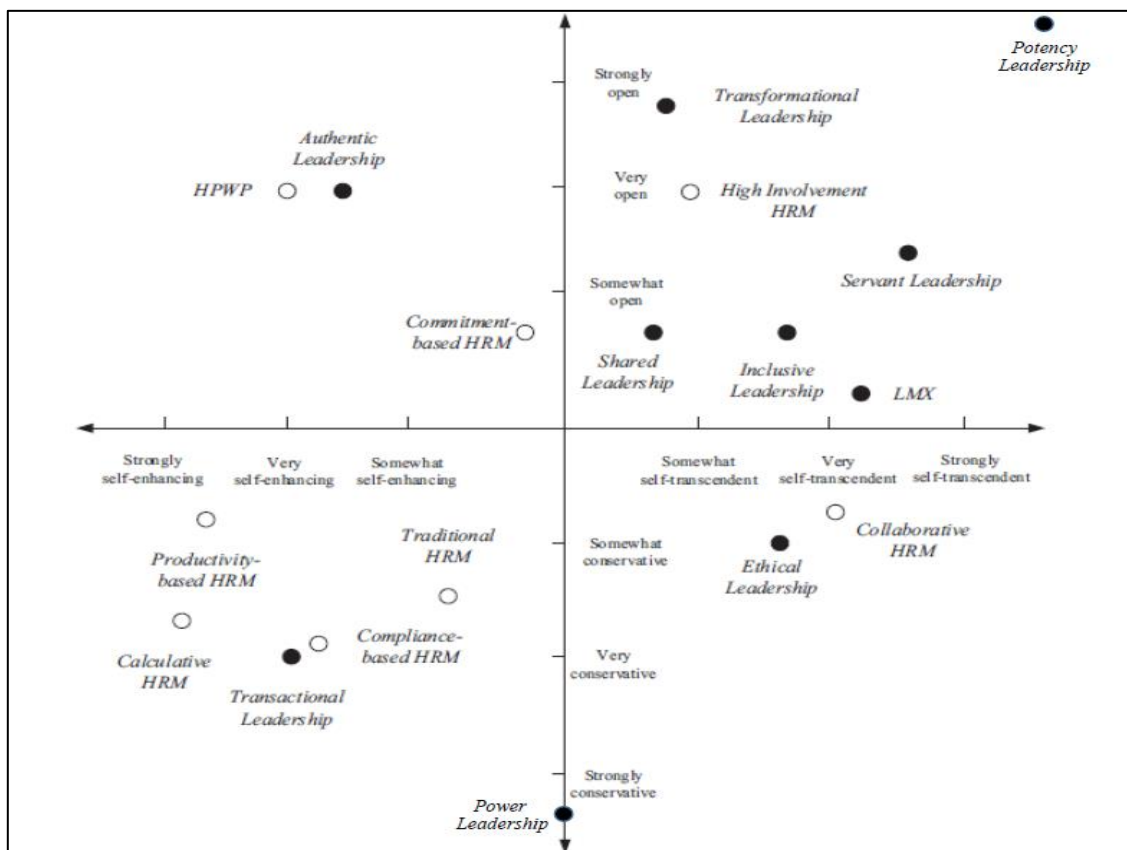


Fig. 1-Mapping of leadership styles on the value-framework (sources: Leroy et al. 2018, p. 251 and Morin & Stokes 2022, p. 19)

Conclusion

From the follower point of view, potency leadership turns out to be positive, function leadership neutral, and power leadership negative.

As a conclusion, potency, power and functional leadership differ. The main dissimilarity concern potency and power leadership. Potency leadership makes followers into leaders, power leadership blocks them. Potency leadership unlocks the individual's potentialities, power leadership imprisons them. For followers, potency leaders are energy givers, power leaders are energy takers. Potency leadership mobilizes active forces, power leadership assembles reactive forces. Potency leadership is a 'power-with' between leader and follower, power leadership is rather a 'power-on' relationship (Deleuze 2004). At last, true leaders have potency leadership whereas power-wielder have power leadership.

Applied to Army leadership, potency leadership should inspire all leaders (officers or NCOs) to put followers at the centre of their action and behaviour. History teaches us that the main achievements obtained by the greater officers took place when they were able to act like potency leaders and that their main failure to the opposite, when they privileged power leadership (Clark 2022).

Questions:

1. As a leader, *vis-à-vis* my team, how can I split my own leadership style between function, potency and power?
2. How can I develop potency leadership?
3. As as a team member, *vis-à-vis* my leaders, where can I place their leadership style on the leadership map?

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