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Why Some People Lead, Why Others Follow, and Why It Matters

Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja
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Recommendation

Thousands of books discuss how to become a great leader. This unusual book discusses the “why” of leadership. Why do leaders exist, why do they lead and why do others follow them? Psychology professor Mark van Vugt and *London Times* writer Anjana Ahuja take you back two million years, when humanity’s ancestors first walked upright in perilous African savannahs, clustering in groups for protection and following leaders who could help them stay alive. Leadership proves so ancient that it predates language. The instincts for leadership and followership, both adaptive behaviors, are indelibly hard-wired into human brains thanks to the evolutionary process. This distinctive book scientifically examines leadership’s ancient roots in fascinating fashion. *BooksInShort* believes it will engage all kinds of leaders, although Machiavellian types may be distinctly uncomfortable to see their sinister traits analyzed with such devastating precision.

Take-Aways

- In Africa’s prehistoric savannahs, early humans grouped together for mutual protection.
- In this hostile environment, following strong leaders gave individuals a better chance of survival – and therefore of reproduction.
- This symbiotic behavior forms the basis of the “Evolutionary Leadership Theory” (ELT).
- Followership presupposes – and demands – the emergence of leaders.
- Evolution hardwired the human brain’s neural circuitry for the adaptive behavioral traits of followership and leadership.
- Due to evolution’s slow pace, these traits still reside in the brain.
- Employees instinctively prefer work arrangements that closely match ancient tribal patterns: small companies and small social groups – instead of huge firms.
- However, most work and social opportunities take place in large organizations and giant civic groupings.
- The “Mismatch Hypothesis”: People do not match well with today’s large social groupings.
- The “Savannah Hypothesis”: People choose tall, imposing male leaders, who represent the intimidating, powerful chiefs who defended their tribes in the Stone Age.

Summary

The “Evolutionary Leadership Theory”

Leadership represents an ancient exercise. It stretches back to the dangerous savannahs of Africa and the origins of mankind some two million years ago. Leadership and followership are adaptive, survival behaviors that humanity’s predecessors learned in prehistoric times, as the Evolutionary Leadership Theory (ELT) both describes and explains. Since ancient times, when males led exclusively, leadership has been an essential component of human life, as well as a crucial aspect in the lives of social

animals, such as “ants, bees, fish and baboons.” For example:

- Bee leaders do a “waggle dance” that lets other hive members know where to find the best nectar. They perform a “figure-of-eight movement,” skipping wildly around. The direction the bee faces points to the nectar’s location. The length of the waggle dance indicates the distance to the nectar.
- Temnothorax ants employ “tandem running,” in which one ant leads another to a food source. The leader ant—who knows the way to the food—periodically slows down so the follower ant can acclimate to new territory. When the follower ant is ready, it taps the leader ant, and both resume full-speed running.
- Elephants are matriarchal. When searching for waterholes, they normally trail an elderly female. Follower elephants value her “long memory.”
- Chimpanzees live in “dominance hierarchies,” with alpha males on top, taking their pick of “food or mates.” Chickens exhibit similar social structures. The alpha chicken pecks other birds, but they cannot peck back. Hence, the term “pecking order.”

The Evolutionary Aspects of Leadership

As ELT maintains, “Evolution has selected for specialized psychological mechanisms that make leadership and followership possible.” Stone Age leadership was “situational, fluid and distributed.” Tribes with leaders thrived. Those without did not. This was true for every activity, including reproduction, the only meaningful marker for evolutionary success. Tribes with effective, “informal, consensual and charismatic” leaders out-reproduced groups that lacked leaders. Eventually, leaderless groups disappeared.

“We are ancient brains trying to make our way in an ultra-modern world.”

Followership, a classic adaptation technique, precedes leadership. Babies mimicking their mothers’ facial expressions provide an early sign of leadership-followership behavior. Sigmund Freud explored this characteristic in his book *Moses and Monotheism*, written on the eve of World War II. Freud explained the Hitler phenomenon: “We know that the great majority of people have a strong need for authority which they can admire, to which they can submit and which dominates and sometimes even ill-treats them.”

“Leadership and followership have become part of human nature.”

Followership is instinctive; history demonstrates numerous situations in which people robotically followed demagogic leaders. Stress-filled situations that parallel ancient life-and-death conditions aggravate this tendency. At such moments, the evolved followership instinct causes people to “respond like puppets to...cues,” that is, to anything that threatens “group cohesion.”

ELT in the 21st Century

Evolutionary Leadership Theory has specific implications for modern life. For instance, people naturally prefer work environments that match the ancient structures in which “trusted elders” guided the activities of small groups. Small companies better represent the tribal groups in which humans gathered hundreds of thousands of years ago. Most social groups—small firm, giant corporation or nation—feature a figurehead. This harkens back to prehistory and the traditional small tribes, each led by a person whom scientists refer to as the “big man.”

“The first chiefdoms emerged around 7,500 years ago in the Fertile Crescent and around 3,000 years ago on the American continent, in the regions of Mexico and the Andes, and on the islands of Hawaii and Polynesia.”

According to the “Savannah Hypothesis,” most “people prefer their leaders to be tall and physically imposing,” as they were when ancient humans settled their tribal disputes with physical intimidation, combat or tribal warfare. Thus, modern human beings are psychologically predisposed to reject the leadership of small people. The ELT theory also may explain why some people feel less comfortable with female senior executives.

“Advertising is a \$400 billion industry built on followership.”

The “Mismatch Hypothesis” contends that tribal conditions ideally suit humans better than the “mammoth corporations and civic structures of the 21st century.” That explains why people routinely gather around a water cooler to trade office gossip: It’s an ancient ritual that traces back to the dawn of history and early tribal life.

What Is Leadership?

Humans depend on leaders to coordinate the attainment of shared goals. What motivates leaders? They receive the perks of “salary, status and sex.” When it comes to evolution, these “three S’s” tie seamlessly together: Evolution depends on successful reproduction, which depends on sex, which men of status are more able to secure readily. The ELT concept ably encompasses numerous leadership theories:

- **“Great man theory”** – Leaders are “born, not made.” Think of GE’s Jack Welch.
- **“Trait theory”** – Leaders can lead because they possess special uncommon “leadership traits,” including “intelligence, extroversion and ambition.” In other species, extroversion translates to boldness.
- **“Psychoanalytic theory”** – Sigmund Freud says social groups are like families. Leaders play “the role of father of the ‘primitive clan’.”
- **“Charismatic leadership theory”** – Leaders with charisma rise to positions of authority because of who they are, not because of their accomplishments.
- **“Behavioral theory”** – In contrast to the charismatic theory, you can recognize leaders based on what they do.
- **“Situation theory”** – Leaders emerge from facing challenging situations.
- **“Contingency theory”** – Leadership is infinitely mutable and depends on individual factors, such as organizational traits or special goals.
- **“Transactional versus transformational leadership”** – The leader is the boss because he or she is paid to be in charge.
- **“Distributed (or dispersed/emergent) leadership”** – No one single leader, but many.
- **“Servant leadership”** – The leader is the steward of the group, often to his or her personal detriment.

Leadership Archetypes

Six additional “leadership prototypes” follow ancient models:

1. **“The warrior”** – An ultramasculine leader in body and spirit – so females seldom fulfill this prototype. This leader showcases a dominant personality as a brave, fierce defender of the group. Exhibits near psychopathic ambition. Will not tolerate dissidents. Modern examples: Joseph Stalin and Sir Winston Churchill.
2. **“The scout”** – This ancient explorer sought new hunting grounds or waterholes, as a risk taker who can handle frustration. Usually male. Examples: Steve Jobs and Bill Gates.
3. **“The diplomat”** – Fosters and sustains group alliances. This pre-historic leader parlayed with other clans about shared water, wars against other tribes, the transfer of brides and similar vital matters. Seldom physically prepossessing (thus, not threatening), often short, feminine-looking. Examples: Henry Kissinger and Hillary Clinton.
4. **“The arbiter”** – These ancient peacekeepers ensured that arguments over women or tribal issues did not compromise group cohesion. These leaders often were strongly built, but able to lead without force.
5. **“The manager”** – This conscientious clan member – a hard worker with superb planning skills – organized work details and made sure that everyone got a fair share of food and water. Example: McDonald’s Jim Skinner.
6. **“The teacher”** – These wise clansmen taught younger members which plants to eat and which to avoid, and how to conduct themselves with other members. This leader often assumed the role of shaman, interpreting the actions of the gods and interceding with them for tribal benefit. These male and female shamens were seldom impressive physically and sometimes had handicaps that barred them from physical tasks. Examples: Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama.

“The bad guys get the girls (and when they are in the fertile phase of their menstrual cycle women are particularly attracted to baddies, according to research).”

Based on its singular leadership insights, ELT is a useful tool for improving the quality of leadership in any organization. Consider 10 leadership recommendations that derive from ELT:

1. **“Don’t overrate the romance of leadership”** – Because decision making is more diffused today, leaders often get more credit or blame than they deserve. However, do not regard contemporary leaders as saints or devils. In the Stone Age, leaders who made the best decisions kept their tribes alive. Things are different in modern society, where “the trail of responsibility is more opaque.”
2. **“Find a niche and develop your prestige”** – In ancient days, people followed individuals with special skills, for example, “flint knapping, hunting or navigating through unfamiliar territory.” These Stone Age leaders carved out special niches for themselves and benefited accordingly.
3. **“Keep it small and natural”** – Thanks to evolution, the human brain adapts most readily to groups of around 150 people (the famous “Dunbar’s Number”). Whenever possible, keep work and social units to this size to maintain optimum “social control.” While this obviously is not possible in big corporations, CEOs of giant organizations should make the most of technology to stay in close touch with all of their employees.
4. **“Favor followers”** – In ancient times, groups were relatively egalitarian and kept their leaders’ power in check. In such a “reverse dominance hierarchy,” the followers possess the true power. This is a good model for modern organizations.
5. **“Practice distributed leadership”** – Early tribal groups followed leaders who were best qualified for particular tasks. Today, one CEO or leader has titular control over everything. With few exceptions, most individuals are not “rainbow leaders” capable of handling diverse tasks with equal expertise. Spread leadership among a group of experts.
6. **“Mind the pay gap”** – In the United States, a CEO earns generally “179 times” the organization’s least-paid employee’s salary. In the UK the multiple is around 100. Possessions did not differentiate status in Stone Age times. Such salary disparity runs counter to humankind’s naturally egalitarian instincts and “evolved psychology.”
7. **“Look for leaders from within”** – The current leader succession model, in which a senior executive picks a replacement, does not mirror the way leaders rose to power on the savannah. There, the best emerged from the group. The current model for leadership selection is anti-Darwinian. “Artificial leaders” take charge – as opposed to ideal, “natural leaders” who have proven their expertise. These artificial leaders have no legitimacy. Groups prosper when followers pick their own leaders.
8. **“Watch out for nepotism”** – “Kin selection theory” posits that people with family ties help each other more than strangers might. Thus, family-owned businesses often do better in tough economic times because everyone pulls together for the common good. In large organizations, nepotism can be dangerous.
9. **“Avoid the dark side”** – As chimpanzees prove, primates instinctively want to dominate their peers. Natural leaders act to quell this tendency. Effective leadership has moved well beyond the alpha male model. Today, it should be, “primus inter pares,” that is, “first among equals.”
10. **“Don’t judge a leader by his or her cover”** – The “cognitive ancestral leader prototype” is a psychological schema that says people naturally seek wartime leaders with overtly masculine physical characteristics. However, this model biases leadership selection. People choosing a leader should be aware of this tendency so they can try to self-correct potentially biased thinking.

About the Authors

Mark van Vugt is a psychology professor at VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and a fellow of the British Academy Centenary Project. **Anjana Ahuja** spent 16 years as a feature writer at *The Times* and holds a doctorate in space physics from Imperial College, London.
