

# Leadership as a Process in Globally Dispersed Organizations

Louise Delaney  
Doctor of Applied Leadership Candidate  
Monarch Business School Switzerland



## Abstract

The concept of leadership continues to evolve as it undergoes shifts to meet the mounting pressure of a highly competitive, global marketplace. Scholars have recognized this change, arguing that leadership is a fluid process in modern organizational life, moving away from traditional characteristics and role-based paradigms. This contention has merit as businesses embrace decentralized structures in globally distributed organizations. To compete on a global scale, leaders can no longer rely on their titles and positional power to steer followers as this approach limits their capacity to achieve organizational and business objectives. Since leaders are the minority in organizations, leadership as a process offers a pragmatic solution as the leadership function extends to include followers, thereby harnessing full resource capability. The article discusses the concept of leadership as a process arguing its efficacy in dispersed organizations. The dimensions of trust, power and communication are discussed as augmented factors for consideration.

**Keywords:** Leadership as a Process, Decentralized Organizations, Global Economy, Followership, Trust, Power, Communication, Resource Capability, Teamwork.

## Introduction

Almost five decades ago, Stodgill (1975) famously said there are as many definitions of leadership as people who have attempted to define it. At the end of the last century, at least 650 definitions of leadership existed in the literature (Bennis & Townsend, 1995). However, despite the fascination with leadership and the relevance of the leadership phenomenon in business, a consensus on the definition of leadership remains elusive amid a myriad of subjective descriptions. The literature remains fragmented and appears lacking in scholarly holism. The absence of an agreed definition of leadership presents challenges for scholars and practitioners.

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Viewed optimistically, this void creates new thought and vision opportunities necessary for survival in a business arena saturated with rapid change and evolution.

The phenomenon of leadership has undergone significant shifts over the last two decades (Offermann & Coats, 2018). It appears to have moved from characteristic and role-based paradigms to process and cultural-based ideas (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Scholars argue that leadership, as a fluid process, is the way forward in modern organizational life (Avolio, 2007; Kellerman, 2012).

There is merit to this argument when one considers today's decentralized organizational structures. Companies often compete globally as dispersed entities relying on highly engaged followers (Novikova & Hamse, 2021). Leadership, confined to leadership roles, limits leadership capacity to those with leadership titles. Since leaders are statistically the minority in most organizations, it is argued that this model does not make practical sense in today's dispersed organizations. Therefore, viewing leadership as a process, including leaders and followers, appears as a meaningful value proposition in today's globalized business landscape.

The argument is put forward that leadership as a process is a pragmatic value proposition for today's globally dispersed organizations grappling with contemporary business challenges. The discussion highlights leadership as a process, emphasizing followership as a central concept component. The discourse elaborates on the dimensions of power, trust and communication as augmented components for consideration within the *leadership as a process* concept.

### Contemporary Business Context

Today's business world is shaped by rapid technological advancement, commercial innovation and unprecedented market disruption. Rapid change is a reliable constant in all business domains and shows no sign of slowing down. Manuel Castells describes the structural changes to the global economy as a shift to an informational society that started in the 1970s (Castells & Kumar, 2014). Castells posits that this society is structured around networks instead of individuals and is facilitated through a constant flow of information via technology (Castells & Kumar, 2014). Castells emphasizes the interrelationship of society's social, economic and political features, arguing that the network is the defining feature that marks the current epoch (Castells & Kumar, 2014). This theory holds in the global corporate world. Many companies are operating in multiple geographies enabled by technology that reduces the global landscape to a perceived localized entity and a series of networks.

Today, businesses face a plethora of challenges, such as; uncertainty about the future (Day & Dennis, 2022), exploding data (Moumeni et al., 2021), regulation and compliance, including data protection law (Veit, 2022), financial management (Cruciani et al., 2022), and recruiting and retaining the right talent (Pelczarski, 2022) to name but a few. Leadership has had to evolve to become more flexible and adaptable to align with these changes and challenges. There has been a notable shift towards a more collaborative leadership style emphasizing communication. Follower input is often considered integral to the decision-making processes. Employee engagement is now considered a critical success factor in human resource management. The rise of remote working options, particularly since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, has also shaped leadership in recent years. Since micromanagement is relatively challenging in remote settings, trust in employees has become a significant overarching tenet of the leadership shift. It is argued that leadership has evolved from being confined to people and roles, into an interdependent process between leaders and followers, in any given context, sharing power and working towards common organizational goals (Northouse, 2021).

### Followership in the Leadership Process

According to Kelley (1992), followership is critical to organizational success. Followers who add value to the organization by thinking independently for themselves, going above and beyond the confines of their job description and supporting their respective team members and leaders are considered core components of contemporary organizational survival (Kelley, 1992). All employees uniting and working together to maximize corporate results, regardless of their titles, increase output optimization (Wirthman, 2014; Stewart et al., 2012). Consequently, this involves followers and leaders cooperating and working harmoniously. As such, followers will sometimes lead, and leaders will sometimes follow (Kelley, 1992). Thus, the leadership function may be conceived as a process interchangeable between leader and follower.

Yukl (2012) defines leadership as facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives (Yukl, 2012). According to Bass (2000), leadership is not only a process of leader influence but an interactive process that can be influenced by anyone involved (Bass, 2000). Northouse (2021) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal. Howell & Costley (2001) also highlight an interactive rather than hierarchical approach to the relationship of leadership and followership, taking the view that they are equally important in achieving group and organizational performance. These definitions suggest that leadership is a process, and it happens within the context of a group working towards common goals. Viewing leadership as a process renders it a two-way interactive event between leaders and followers. Therefore, followership becomes part of the leadership equation.

Harvard business scholar Barbara Kellerman visualizes leadership as an equilateral triangle, including followers (Kellerman, 2012). Her controversial book, *The End of Leadership*, emphasizes followers and context as equal components of a triangular conceptual model, illustrating the leadership process (Kellerman, 2012). Kellerman recognizes the importance of the leader but states that followers and context are equally significant (Kellerman, 2012). Kellerman's model aligns closely with Dunham and Pierce's (1989) leadership process model. Dunham & Pierce illustrate four factors to consider when leadership occurs; follower, leader, context and outcomes (Dunham & Pierce, 1989). These multifactor models suggest a paradigm shift, moving from conceptualizing leadership as a distinct role and position toward considering leadership as a process involving other factors.

### The Power Dilemma

Globalization and technological advancement are driving shifts from traditional hierarchical constructs toward flatter decentralized structures, resulting in power matrices moving from the confines of selected leaders to dispersed followers. However, despite these shifts, the order of members based on authority, responsibility and title is still the preferred organizational structure in most companies. Traditional hierarchical constructs are the predominant way business entities represent themselves (Kanter, 2019). Employees who have reached a select few managerial or leadership roles may feel that their position has been hard-earned and that their title, positional power and authority are something they do not wish to easily relinquish or share with subordinates. Therefore, the feelings of managers surrounding empowering followers may be a challenge to overcome if considering leadership as a process in organizations (Kanter, 2019).

While hierarchies provide structure and clarity of responsibility, it is argued that they may hinder followership optimization by slowing decision-making and efficient execution of tasks (Kanter, 2019). This is particularly true for situations relating to or requiring change (Kotter et al., 2021). Traditionally, people in leadership roles are tasked with leading their teams toward positive outcomes. However, leadership, viewed through the lens of organizational hierarchy, confines power and decision-making to the people who hold the leadership roles and limits the full capability of organizational resources by constraining most employees working in the organization (Kotter et al., 2021). Power, perceived as a force for making autonomous decisions and progressing workflows, may build a bridge toward helping to alleviate leaders' feelings of disempowerment in shared power situations (Kanter, 2019; Follet, 2013).

Mary Parker Follett's work helps to cast a new lens on shared power structures in organizations. According to Follett (1984), power shared equates to power multiplied and does not equate to power diluted (Parker, 1984; Avolio, 2010). In this context, power is perceived as an abundant and expandable force rather

than a limited and exhaustible one (Parker, 1984; Follet, 2013). Mary Parker Follet's power-with concept discusses power and authority as the science of achieving organizational goals through people and fostering a culture of cooperation between management and staff (Parker, 1984). Follett believes genuine power is not power-over but power-with (Parker, 1984; Follet, 2013). Managers do not abdicate ultimate responsibility. However, they share power with their subordinates to maximize organizational success (Follet, 2013). The discrete but important distinction between maintaining ultimate responsibility and sharing power versus abdicating responsibility and giving away power is essential for managers to understand.

Given the continuing flattening of organizational structures, more reliance on teamwork, and the growing complexity of work, there is increased interest from both scholars and practitioners in leadership styles encouraging the empowerment of subordinates (Arnold et al., 2000; Seibert et al., 2004). The leadership role is becoming much more challenging. Managing the full range of responsibilities in environments characterized by globalization, changing technologies, diminishing resources, and increased costs is increasingly difficult (Chase, 2000; Jaffe, 1995; Kinicki et al., 1996; Murphy, 2002).

Further, leaders are tasked with managing their employees in the face of both micro and macro demands over which they may not have any control, such as layoffs, downsizing, social unrest, and political and economic instability, which put additional pressure on leaders to perform effectively (Niehoff et al., 2001; Sparks et al., 2001). In response to these demands, it has become a practical imperative for leaders to engage in empowering initiatives involving followers, as it is neither feasible nor realistic for leaders to have all the answers or make all the decisions all of the time (Lovelace et al., 2007). Additionally, time constraints are continually cited as one of the top managerial challenges adding to the list of demands (Claessens et al., 2007; Ahmad & Van Looy, 2020). Therefore, it is argued that sharing power between leaders and followers in contemporary work settings is needed (Abbas et al., 2022; Avolio, 2007; Kellermann, 2012).

Both scholarly and practical evidence indicates that organizations and teams that use power-sharing initiatives outperform their counterparts that rely on traditional hierarchical structures (Stewart et al., 2012; Wirthman, 2014). Leadership as a process encourages leaders to share power with their subordinates, and when this occurs, autonomy proliferates among self-directed followers who wish to take the initiative. As such, the leadership function becomes an entity in and of itself that transmits from leader to follower, or follower to leader, based on the nature of the goal (Ladkin, 2020). The force of power exercised to pursue organizational goals, performed by either leaders or followers, translates to organizational outcomes (Follett, 2013). As such, leadership as a process appears as a viable leadership concept that could facilitate power sharing in corporate settings by allowing power to move fluidly between leaders and followers.

### The Trust Factor

According to Gordon (2012), leadership is a simple process with trust as the foundation. To conceive of leadership as a fluid process interchangeable between leaders and followers, trust is a foundational component that must be considered. Theorists conceive of trust as an expectation surrounding other people and their behavior (Hosmer, 1995). Trust is interrelated with power because trust must be present before power sharing can be genuinely enacted (Bachmann, 2001). Trust is a fragile resource because it may be difficult and time-consuming to develop, yet it can be easily and quickly broken (Ring, 1996). Therefore, building intra-organizational trust requires relational vigilance, openness, commitment and respect (Becerra & Huemer, 2002).

Scholarly recognition of the importance of trust in leadership within organizational contexts has resulted in many investigations into its antecedents (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). These studies are increasingly being examined within leadership as process literature. Research has indicated its role as an antecedent to many valued performance outcomes and a process resulting from collaborative interaction between leaders and followers (Bartram & Casimir, 2007). Trust has been shown to influence communication, cooperation, and information sharing (Ferrin et al., 2006; Rempel et al., 1985). Trust has also been shown to influence decreased attrition (Connell et al., 2003; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), improved performance levels (Dirks & Ferrin, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and enhanced perception of organizational stability (Rich, 1997; Shaw, 1997).

According to the literature, the critical components of trust are a willingness to be vulnerable (Butler, 1991), positive expectations that interests will be protected (Dirks & Ferrin, 2000) and assessment of others' intentions with sincerity and integrity (Butler, 1991; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Rousseau et al., 1998). The literature further indicates that the willingness to accept vulnerability evolves throughout a relationship via repeated interactions and an accumulation of reciprocity (Baier, 1986; Govier, 1994; Jones & George, 1998).

Trust is defined as a psychological state, accepting vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another (Rousseau et al., 1998). The willingness to accept vulnerability evolves throughout a relationship due to repeated interactions (Baier, 1986; Govier, 1994; Jones & George, 1998; Lewicki et al., 1998). Leaders and followers must be willing participants in the trust process for shared power to work effectively inside the organization. All parties must be willing to accept a feeling of vulnerability, knowing that the underlying organizational intention is positive and does not involve playing political games or seeking reputational harm (Nienaber et al., 2015). Leadership as a process requires baseline levels of trust, both vertically and horizontally, throughout the organization.

## The Glue of Communication

Organizational communication is often described as the glue that binds together the various components of the organization, thereby enabling the achievement of company objectives (Davis, 1953; Cacciattolo, 2015). It is argued that effective communication inside organizations determines factors such as; staff satisfaction (Goldhaber et al., 1978), retention (Tanius et al., 2017), motivation (Furlich, 2016), morale (Wentworth, 1990), creativity levels (Amabile, 1996), and innovation levels (Hynes & Mickahail, 2019).

Communication is interrelated with power because follower empowerment is the process through which individuals perceive that they control situations via power sharing, which is difficult to enact without communication (Rogers & Shinghal, 2003). Power and ownership must be distributed throughout the organization for leadership to be collaborative or shared. Shared power implies that teams make decisions with a consensus format, and everyone has responsibility for leading and learning, which involves increasing levels of communication. Power sharing moves accountability and responsibility to individual integrity and peer agreements, and as people collaborate around common goals, partnerships and coalitions evolve, resulting in lateral networks of mutual influence (Allen et al., 2006). The process is described as multiple relationships acting in a flexible, flattened structure based on partnerships, self-regulation and interdependence, rendering the function of communication paramount (Allen et al., 2006).

In the book *Reinventing the Corporation*, Naisbitt & Aburdene (1986) refer to shared power as a grid where power is found in the center and not at the top. Hierarchical structures are thus replaced by crisscrossing networks, overlapping, changing and with fluid boundaries (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1986). This web-like structure supports optimum participation, interaction, and empowerment (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1986). However, this structure pressures the communication function because more significant numbers of people are involved in decision-making, negotiation and execution, often based on the appropriate dissemination of information via technology.

These complex networks demand much more frequent communication than traditional top-down directives from leaders to subordinates. Therefore, the function of communication becomes much more critical in day-to-day operations. The role of communication is critical to the efficacy of leadership as a process concept. Without effective communication, leadership as a process cannot work. Thus, clarity of objectives, roles and responsibilities and assessment of progress requires more pronounced communication because larger communities of employees work on projects together more autonomously, often in virtual and globally dispersed settings. For communication to act as organizational glue in these flatter organizational structures, where power is shared among trusted participants, it must be treated as a top priority by all employees.

### Discussion

It is noteworthy to mention that leadership as a process is not considered advantageous in all organizational contexts, and not all followers are universally receptive to empowering initiatives (Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001; Lorinkova et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2022). Some employees wish only to follow and have no interest in leading or assuming part ownership and responsibility for larger projects (Kelley, 2012). Further, Denerlein & Kirkman (2022) suggest that these empowering strategies may backfire by eliciting unethical conduct. As discussed earlier, not all managers are open to sharing their authority and decision-making powers. Theoretical ambiguity remains as to when, why and how empowering leadership models such as leadership as a process is most likely to benefit work settings and employees. Due to this, a universal argument for leadership as a process in all settings is not possible nor warranted.

However, despite the critique and lack of comprehensive scholarly analysis, the argument is in favor of the concept of leadership as a process in globally dispersed organizations, primarily for practical purposes, to cope with the accelerated levels of change and disruption currently underway. The technological acceleration that the world is presently witnessing could not have been predicted decades ago. This technology has arguably transformed our current working environments into hubs that spend large proportions of time disseminating information flows via the technology.

Present day knowledge workers have experienced first-hand the web of networks described by Castells in contemporary working life and can identify with the business challenges from the literature (Drucker, 1992; Carleton, 2011). These trends and challenges have caused further reflection on the tacit belief of the leadership function as a role. Further appreciation for the role of followership and context is recognized within leadership as a process. The often-held belief that a leader is a person who is the personification of all solutions to all problems begins to fade as the realization that leadership is conceptual and is, in reality, not confined to those who hold leadership titles.

Despite books such as Kellerman's *The End of Leadership* (2012), the fascination with leadership remains. Perhaps the problem with leadership, considered a positional role, is that the associated range of skills, characteristics and performance levels are, as previously mentioned, too ambitious and unattainable for one person to personify with a leadership title: we are all human, after all. Liberating the leadership function from positional paradigms frees the essence of the pulse of leadership. It allows it to flow, like an energetic wave, across the organization, to be picked up by those who wish to lead, irrespective of their level.



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Leadership, considered a functioning process involving all resources in organizations, working together, trusting one another, sharing power and communicating effectively, could be envisioned as a nirvana for optimum business performance, job satisfaction and purpose-driven work. Managers, working together with subordinates inside of these web-like networks, directing their mutual energies towards the organizational goals at hand without political interference or hierarchical restrictions, may create more harmonious relationships, increase comradery, morale, and a sense of purpose and act as an all-round faster and better way to optimize outputs in dispersed organizations. Imagining all employees as co-producers of leadership energy, working together is perceived as an exciting prospect.

This vision is arguably a pragmatic value proposition in dispersed organizations because, theoretically, it optimizes the valuable and limited resource of time, maximizes all willing resources working inside the organization regardless of level and enables the leadership function to permeate throughout the company. As discussed earlier, managers retain ultimate responsibility. However, followers play an equally significant role in the leadership process.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The current macro business environment demands new thought and vision, requiring CEOs and managers at all levels to open their minds to fresh perspectives at a micro level. As previously described by scholars such as Kellerman (2012) and Avolio (2007), conceptualizing the leadership function as a fluid process between managers and subordinates may build a bridge, helping to support future-orientated thinking, moving away from traditional paradigms that are becoming obsolete. Conceiving the leadership function as a process provides a practical business solution to companies operating in a dispersed fashion across many geographies.

As managers grapple with the contemporary challenges of an information society involving the management of multiple webs of networks along with the pressures of maintaining performance levels in the face of rapid change and uncertainty, leadership as a process appears as a pragmatic approach in terms of harnessing all resources inside of the organization and optimizing company outputs. It is not feasible in today's business environment to think that a minority of people holding leadership titles, and adhering to traditional hierarchical structures, can do it all.

Confining the leadership function to these selected roles today is counterproductive because evidence indicates that companies who have adopted flatter hierarchical structures early, and share power with followers, are outperforming their counterparts (Wirthman, 2014). It is prudent to consider the dimensions of power, trust and communication if implementing a shift to leadership as a process within a corporate rollout.

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Sharing power between leaders and followers, trusting one another, and communicating often and effectively, have been shown to influence positive behaviors among followers, such as; cooperation & information sharing (Ferrin et al., 2006; Rempel et al., 1985), collaboration & performance levels (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), retention (Tanius et al., 2017), organizational effectiveness & enhanced motivation levels (Furlich, 2016), improved morale (Wentworth, 1990), creativity (Amabile, 1996) and innovation (Hynes & Mickahail, 2019). Therefore, the benefits clearly seem desirable.

Although there is a risk involved when empowering followers to operate autonomously, it is argued that the benefits outweigh the risks, as evidenced by the positive behaviors this approach solicits. Any potential risk may be mitigated by managers maintaining a stewardship function on behalf of the company and performing regular checks and balances. However, the micromanagement cadences of former models and practices are discontinued. Employing healthy levels of trust is demonstrated by taking calculated risks with others and expecting them to do the right thing when no one is looking or supervising. Checks and balances may be performed. However, trust underpins the overall process.

People are at the heart of determining the success or failure of leadership as a process because, without the willing participation of everyone, it will not work (Kellerman, 2012). Changing mindsets is no easy feat, and it is recommended that the message be communicated explicitly to the entire organization starting from the CEO. This will demonstrate the conscious organizational intention to shift and will articulate the positive outcomes anticipated following the shift. All employees must see that it is an intended cultural shift and requires everyone to cooperate. Change initiatives are challenging (Kotter et al., 2021). It is recommended that companies invest in regular management coaching and training initiatives to help managers transition. Recognition events demonstrating prestige and reward for sharing power with followers and allowing the leadership function to permeate throughout teams are also recommended to encourage sustained cultural adoption.

It is recommended that these cultural considerations are stated explicitly and integrated into the company's values, informing HR hiring policy to ensure that new hires embody the essence of the philosophy before being hired. When hiring individual contributors, it is recommended that the interview process is interrogated for its robustness in assessing self-management, initiative, proactiveness and comfort levels regarding autonomous working. When hiring managers, it should be robust enough to adequately test beliefs concerning the sharing of power and assess communication skills and the willingness to trust their teams.

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The last decades have brought unprecedented levels of change and disruption, surprising even to those who consider themselves adept at sensing and seizing future trends (Abbas et al., 2022). It appears that the only known today is the unknown. Change and adaptability are necessary to evolve and survive (Kotter et al., 2021). Leadership, being considered as a fluid process, may help to liberate the energy of change and evolution among all parties inside companies, building bridges towards the enabling of the co-creation of future-orientated opportunities, thereby maximizing organizational outputs in globally dispersed companies.



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### End Notes