

# What Leaders Read 1

Key texts from the business world

**Summary Report** | Autumn 2003



A review of literature carried out for NCSL by **Jonathan Abra, Martin Hunter, Robert Smith** and **Steve Kempster (ed)** of the Lancaster University Management School



National College for School Leadership

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# Contents

<b>1. What is in this Summary?</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Overview</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 Assumptions	4
2.2 Transformational leadership versus transactional leadership	4
2.3 Concepts of leadership	4
<b>3. Traditional Models</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1 Are leaders born, not made?	5
3.2 Does leadership depend upon context?	5
<b>4. Contemporary Trends</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1 What is the relationship between followers and leaders?	6
4.2 What constitutes leadership?	6
<b>5. Leadership Development</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. Summary</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>7. Recommended Texts According to the Broad Interests of Readers</b>	<b>9</b>
7.1 Limited familiarity, activist/practitioner	9
7.2 Greater familiarity, activist/practitioner	9
7.3 Limited familiarity, reflector/theorist	9
7.4 Greater familiarity, reflector/theorist	10
<b>8. References</b>	<b>11</b>

# 1. What is in this Summary?

The study of leadership as a formal discipline is a relatively recent phenomenon and has never been more popular than at the present time. Van Maurik (2001) tells how in 1996 alone, 187 books and articles were published with the word 'leadership' in the title. It is certain that the number has increased since then. Yet leadership itself is timeless and can be found woven into the fabric of writing throughout the ages. From Homer, Plutarch and Plato through Machiavelli and Shakespeare to Arthur Miller and Ernest Hemingway, the great works of literature and philosophy are shot-through with insights into critical leadership tasks (Clemens and Mayer, 1999).

This document summarises a review of contemporary literature dedicated to the study of leadership and leadership development. Texts covered were not specifically related to education but rather draw on the more general leadership cannon.

The aim of the review was to provide school leaders with increased understanding and awareness of the range of published texts in this field. Its commissioning stemmed from the recognition that school leaders may benefit from better access to broader leadership theory, developed outside of the more narrow realms of education.

The review involved the production of individual reviews of 20 of the key titles on leadership and the development of leaders and managers.

Typically four to six pages in length, each review:

- provides brief biographical details of the author[s]
- gives a summary of the main themes of the text
- offers a broad assessment of the merits of the text
- attempts to identify the main audience to which it may appeal

While recognising that endeavouring to encapsulate the essence of each text in such a way is highly problematic, it is nevertheless anticipated that these summaries will provide a helpful overview for the interested reader. Moreover they are designed to help the busy professional to identify potential areas of further reading, thereby offering a possible route into what may otherwise appear an impassable body of work.

In identifying the 20 key texts, the writers contacted eminent authors and researchers in the field of leadership and leadership development internationally to ask them to nominate their 10 favourite texts. Nominations were received from 18 of the world's most highly distinguished academics, currently working in nine different countries.

This document provides an overview of the review and summarises the main themes running through contemporary leadership research.

The 20 key titles are listed below, together with the internet address where their individual reviews can be found:

Individual reviews can be downloaded from the NCSL website

**[www.ncsl.org.uk/whatleadersread](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/whatleadersread)**

1. ADAIR, J. (1988) *Effective Leadership: how to develop leadership skills*.
2. AVOLIO, B. J. (1999) *Full Leadership Development: Building the Vital Forces in Organizations*.
3. BADARACCO, J. L. (2002) *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*.
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5. BROWN, A. D. (2000) *The Six Dimensions of Leadership*.
6. DAFT, R. L. (2002) *The Leadership Experience*.
7. GOLEMAN, D., R. BOYZATIS and A. MCKEE (2003) *The New Leaders: Transforming the Art of Leadership into the Science of Results*.
8. GRINT, K. (2001) *The Arts of Leadership*.
9. HEIFETZ, R. A. and D. L. LAURIE (1997) 'The Work of Leadership'.
10. KETS de VRIES, M. (2001) *The Leadership Mystique: A User's Manual for the Human Enterprise*.
11. KANUNGO R. N. and J. A. CONGER (1998) *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*.
12. KOTTER, J. P. (1999) *John P. Kotter on What Leaders Really Do*.
13. KOUZES, J. M. and B. Z. POSNER (2002) *The Leadership Challenge*.
14. LIPMAN-BLUMEN, J. (2000) *Connective Leadership: Managing in a Changing World*.
15. MCCALL, M. W., M. M. LOMBARDO and A. M. MORRISON (1988) *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job*.
16. McCAULEY, C.D., R. S. MOXLEY and E. VAN VELSOR (1998) *Centre for Creative Leadership: Handbook of Leadership*.
17. NORTHOUSE, P. G. (2000) *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.
18. PERKINS, D. T., M. P. HOLTMAN, P. R. KESSLER and C. MCCARTHY (2000) *Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition*.
19. WRIGHT, P. L. (1996) *Managerial Leadership*.
20. YUKL, G. A. (2001) *Leadership in Organizations*.

## 2. Overview

Today's leaders are facing business and social conditions of unprecedented uncertainty. These conditions demand from them exceptional levels of expertise in order both to understand and to respond (responsibly) to an environment marked increasingly by discontinuity, division and unpredictability. It is no longer possible to assume that tomorrow's solutions will be found in the body of knowledge we call "leadership". Yet leadership is firmly back on the agenda in organisations and, in particular, in the popular management literature.

### 2.1 Assumptions

How we conceptualise leadership (what it is we think leadership "is") clearly influences our assumptions about how (or, indeed, if) this type of leader can be developed. The ways in which we understand learning (when and where it occurs, what factors influence it, how we might be able to bring it about) informs the conceptual frameworks within which, as educators and developers, we set out to design effective learning experiences.

Whereas a few of the books reviewed here, notably those by Daft and Yukl, purport to give a synopsis of the whole field of leadership study, most offer an explanation based on a particular conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

### 2.2 Transformational leadership versus transactional leadership

Leadership, according to Bennis (1993, 1994) involves activity that transforms an organisation and includes things such as creating a vision for the future, mobilising support towards building momentum for such a vision to be realised by empowering others to take responsibility for their actions. Such popular notions of appropriate leadership action influence the way practising senior managers articulate their learning needs. A contrasting popular notion is that of transactional leadership. This involves handling operational issues around control of resources. According to Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1999) transformational leaders are

essentially philosophers while transactional leaders are organisational "technologists". Avolio is an advocate of the belief that transactional leadership actually forms the basis of transformational leadership and that one grows from the other.

Heifetz and Laurie and Kotter in particular, write in a how-to style that gives the aspiring leader a firm grasp of what some researchers have shown that some successful leaders actually do. While this may be a reductionist approach, it has merit in that it does not require the same level of abstraction as some, more theoretical, texts and allows the reader to feel he or she can make a difference to his or her practice fairly readily. Kouzes and Posner even term their text "a personal coach in a book".

### 2.3 Concepts of leadership

In addition to the popular ideas about leadership, there has also been increasing academic interest in conceptualising leadership in its different guises. It has become more common, for example, to accept that leadership exists within all levels of an organisation, that issues of power, gender and identity are part of the wider picture, and that all of us lead and manage in many contexts. In short, that leadership is no longer the sole domain of the powerful few (this point, in particular, is picked up by Badaracco and Wright among the books reviewed here).

Whatever the driving forces for this popularity, it is clear that many of our common sense notions of who leaders are and what it is they do are being squarely challenged and our ideas about how to select and develop such individuals are being questioned. A cautionary note must be sounded however, since the increase in attention on leadership does not mean that management is suddenly rendered obsolete; quite the contrary. As Kakabadse and Kakabadse remind us:

**The greatest paradox of all is between leading and managing, pushing for great change and yet keeping the organisation ticking over....both are required in today's world. (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999, p5)**

## 3. Traditional Models

In his 1989 paper, Yukl concluded that: “Most of the theories are beset with conceptual weaknesses and lack strong empirical support. Several thousand empirical studies have been conducted but most of the results are contradictory and inconclusive.” Despite this rather bewildering assessment, however, most summaries of the subject of leadership tend to classify three broad approaches to its study, namely traits and behaviours; contingency and situational leadership.

### 3.1 Are leaders born, not made?

The serious study of leadership began in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, with the bulk of research conducted at that time reflecting the then prevailing view that leaders are born, rather than made. As such studies generally sought to discover the personal attributes that marked an individual out as a leader or a leader in the making and many quantitative studies were undertaken in the belief that diligent observation and measurement would pinpoint the leaders of the future. Initially crude, the parameters against which existing leaders were assessed became more sophisticated and some commonalities appeared to come to the fore.

Such research into the personality traits that made leaders was, however, fraught with controversy over methodology and underlying assumptions and subsequently fell out of favour. Yet the continued wide acceptance of competency-based selection, psychometric profiling and type indicator tests such as the Myers-Briggs types (Myers and McCaulley, 1985) illustrate the continuing influence of the approach and the strength of attachment leadership development professionals have to it. Van Mourik (2001) even quotes a study in Western Ontario which points to possible genetic influences on leadership. The popular work of Goleman (2001) on emotional intelligence, and by extension the work reviewed here by Goleman et al, seems to be an advanced form of personality traits study. Similarly, the attribution of charisma to a leader, as described by Kanungo and Conger also appears to fit the mould of a personality traits-based explanation.

On the whole little credence is given to the proposition that leaders are born rather than made in the selection of books reviewed. While many of the authors do examine the early work on personality traits, they give far more attention to the way those traits are translated into behaviour (eg Wright, Lipman-Blumen).

### 3.2 Does leadership depend upon context?

In contrast to the personality traits perspective, the contingency approach is concerned with the degree to which a leader is driven by the context within which he or she operates. This is based on the underlying assumption that the leader and the context are knowable and can be effectively categorised and described. The implication here is that not every leader is suited to every context and the individual must develop a heightened self-awareness and strong situation-specific analytical skills to operate successfully. Northouse, Adair and Kets de Vries are all interested in issues relating to leaders' context.

Advocates of situational leadership theories adopt the position that certain contexts demand certain kinds of leaders who display certain characteristics. However the difference between the contingency and situational perspectives is that the latter believes it is possible for a leader to generate a wide repertoire of styles to suit different situations. Here then the leader modifies his or her behaviours to suit whatever situation presents itself. Consequently the critical development work required is in enhancing a leader's ability to analyse a broad range of contexts while at the same time expanding their capacity for flexibility and versatility.

## 4. Contemporary Trends

Contemporary approaches to conceptualising leadership among the academic community question the basic assumptions upon which the traditional ideas outlined above are based (Northouse, Yukl). As well as increasing doubt as to the empirical rigour of such approaches, current thinking in social sciences tends to reject the idea that such objective accounts of either the individual or the situation are ever possible (Grint 1995).

This is an important development, not only from the point of view of academics studying and writing about leadership but also because many of the theories that are now commonly contested form the theoretical bedrock from which a considerable amount of leadership and management development activities are designed.

Instead a number of other areas have emerged as the main focuses for study.

### 4.1 What is the relationship between followers and leaders?

The relationship between followers and leaders is a frequent focus for contemporary writings on leadership. As a result, the potential field of debate is shifted away from what a leader or a situation is 'really like' and towards the processes by which the phenomenon of leadership is able to occur.

Heifetz for example, combines a relatively old theme about situations that require what he calls "technical" issues (management?) and "adaptive" responses (leadership?), with an interesting newer perspective about forcing subordinates to reflect upon their influence in the achievement of goals. For him, the critical issues centre firstly on whether or not people have the capacity to respond to non-routine situations where solutions cannot be derived from previous experience, and secondly on the role the leader plays in reflecting the need for problem-solving back to their followers, ie the degree to which solutions in times of crises come from within a group of followers rather than being provided by a mythical "great leader". This theme is developed by Grint in *The Arts of Leadership* and can clearly be seen in action in Perkins' description of the transantarctic expedition.

### 4.2 What constitutes leadership?

Grint's work also casts doubt on the degree to which it is really possible to produce objective accounts of leaders actions and the contexts within which they occurred. Instead he claims that all accounts are derived from linguistic reconstructions of events – an approach he terms "constitutive". This constitutive approach does not deny the importance of leadership but it does place a question mark over the philosophical issues that surround it. So, for example, whether actions taken in a particular situation count as 'leadership' and whether or not those actions were appropriate for the particular situation are issues that depend not on objective, rational analysis, but on the relative power of persuasive accounts. A crisis is only a crisis because we are persuaded it is so.

Grint's writings beg a further set of questions on the issues surrounding leadership. For instance, what roles do followers play in mitigating the excesses of leaders? (Grint) How important are the politics of greed, envy and fear in the construction of the myth of leadership? (Kets de Vries). Is the myth of heroic leadership an integral part of the cycle of ensuring that the 'led' are permanently disempowered? (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992) Is it more illuminating to think of leadership as a process not a person? (Hosking, 1988).

It remains to be seen how these new concepts of leadership feed into ongoing thinking about leadership development.

## 5. Leadership Development

The texts on leadership development reviewed here acknowledge, at least in part, the shift away from the assumption that learning can only be achieved by formal means and well-established formulae. More emphasis is now placed on the development of leadership through experience (McCall et al, McCauley et al, for example), yet there is still a degree of adherence to programmes and courses.

More widely in society there is growing interest in new modes of learning and knowledge is no longer viewed as a static resource; rather learning is considered a continuous and integral function of life. Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997) describe the way that individuals in management positions learn through 'holistic' approaches in which the whole person is mediated through experience. The central figure in the development of experiential learning is Kolb, whose learning cycle is reproduced below.

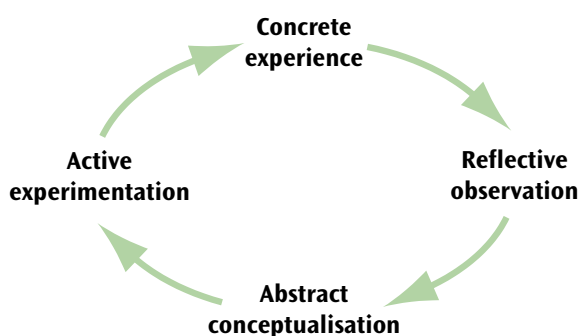


Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984)

The ideas embedded in experiential learning are closely allied to action learning theory, pioneered by Revans (1983). This stresses the process of enquiry as the central tenet of learning, when expertise alone is insufficient. According to Revans:

**There can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning.**

(Revans, 1983 p.54)

The value of experiential learning has been increasingly recognised in recent years. This recognition is highlighted in the study of public sector leadership recruitment and retention trends, conducted by the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU 2001). A central conclusion of this study was that in order to create and support a new breed of leaders, a fresh approach to leadership development must be promoted. Taught programmes must be balanced with experiential learning; leaders gain new perspectives and competencies through working in different environments.



## 6. Summary

The collection of works reviewed here represents the recommendations of leading academic commentators on leadership from around the world. It should be noted that these views are largely dominated by an American perspective that centres on the leader as the fulcrum of leadership. However recent writings have seen the emergence of an increasingly loud European voice, which has sought to extend the concept of leadership beyond the leader to the relationship between leaders and followers. Implicit within this extension has been something of a move from the macro to the micro, as writers increasingly recognise that leadership may be markedly more local in nature than more traditional notions of universal truths and archetypical scripts may have us believe.

The notion of leadership as a social construction, shaped within particular communities such as schools may have significant implications for traditional approaches to leadership development. We may therefore be on the cusp of a period of transition in understanding leadership and the ways in which it is developed.

## 7. Recommended Texts According to the Broad Interests of Readers

This section provides some guidance to readers on how to access those books which are most likely to be of interest to them, depending on their relationship to the subject of leadership. To save the individual from having to read all 20 reviews before deciding which books he or she might like to read we have attempted to provide a ‘menu’ according to two criteria: the reader’s familiarity with the subject of leadership and the individual’s learning style.

As noted above, individual reviews can be accessed via the NCSL website [www.ncsl.org.uk/whatleadersread](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/whatleadersread)

### 7.1 Limited familiarity, activist/practitioner

For the reader who has a limited degree of familiarity with the subject of leadership and leadership development and is inclined towards a learning style that is predominantly about ‘doing’, we might recommend **Daft’s** best-selling introductory text, used widely in undergraduate and postgraduate courses on leadership around the world. **Adair’s** hugely successful and very accessible book is grounded in practical examples and ought to appeal to those of an activist persuasion. **Bennis’s** book, built around interviews with contemporary leaders and dealing with the ‘hows’ of leadership is similarly immediate in its appeal. **Perkins’** eminently readable book about leading in extreme circumstances offers some very memorable vignettes that the reader might translate into his own circumstances and for those who might enjoy something to challenge them and their thinking on leadership, **Kouzes** and **Posner’s** book is a good starting point.

### 7.2 Greater familiarity, activist/practitioner

For the reader who is more familiar with the ideas around leadership but who is still of an activist-practitioner learning style, the reviewers would point to **Yukl’s** overview of the subject with its extensive referencing and ideas for further reading. **Daft** might also serve a similar purpose here. **Heifetz** and **Laurie’s** article offers real substance to one who is familiar with, or experienced in, leadership and in terms of leadership development, the books by **McCall** et al and **Alvolio** represent insightful yet practical guides. As a recommendation to help this group to think somewhat more reflectively we offer the title by **Badaracco** on leading quietly.

### 7.3 Limited familiarity, reflector/theorist

If, on the other hand, you were someone who already liked to reflect on theory and think in terms of abstract concepts but were still relatively new to the arena of leadership and leadership development we would recommend that you start off with **Northouse’s** work, which introduces the reader to the main theories and models that have been developed over the last century. Again we would point you in the direction of **Kouzes** and **Posner** and for the same reason as outlined above. **Brown’s** writings on the dimensions of leadership provides a stimulating read that encourages the reader to analyse his own style and offers some novel insights. In spite of its title, we would recommend **Kotter’s** book to this style of reader, both because it offers a challenge and because, in using real-life examples over a period of two decades, it shows how thinking can develop. *The Handbook of Leadership Development* by **Macauley** et al represents an excellent introduction to the concepts of leadership learning and developmental processes.

## 7.4 Greater familiarity, reflector/theorist

For the student of leadership who really wants to be stretched in their conceptualisation of the phenomenon and who wants to read something beyond the traditional we have compiled the longest shortlist. Here we have included **Grint's** idiosyncratic and challenging view of leadership. Here, too, **Kets de Vries's** highly readable book exploring the psychological aspects of the subject is recommended. **Goleman** et al offer the allied view of leadership as a function of emotional intelligence and **Jean Lipman-Blumen**, the only female author in the selection, introduces the concept of connective leadership. **Peter Wright's** book on managerial leadership may prove particularly stimulating and challenging to those wedded to the 'great man' school of thinking about leaders, whereas **Conger** and **Kanungo** balance that particular argument by talking about the importance of charisma. **Yukl's** comprehensive and detailed overview is a good source of contextual information for all of the other books and, as mentioned above, a good place to start in order to explore some of the more common models of leadership.

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