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Article

# Unveiling the Enigma of Leadership: The Need for an Integrative Approach to Followership in Warren Bennis's Theories

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**Abstract:** This article critically examines Warren Bennis's understanding of leadership, with a particular focus on the overlooked aspect of followership. While Bennis's theories have greatly influenced the leadership discourse, their limited consideration of follower perspectives raises crucial concerns. By exploring the intersection of leadership and followership, this article uncovers the gaps in Bennis's approach and emphasizes the need for a more integrative understanding of leadership dynamics. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced and holistic viewpoint on leadership, highlighting the importance of follower perspectives in effectively sustaining leadership excellence.

**Keywords:** warren bennis; leadership; followership; follower perspectives; integrative approach; leadership dynamics; holistic; ubuntu

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## 1. Introduction

Leadership, with its pervasive influence on organizations and societies, has been subject to extensive study and analysis. Scholars and practitioners have looked to renowned leadership thinker Warren Bennis for guidance and insights. While Bennis's theories have undeniably contributed to the leadership discourse, there is a noticeable omission in his approach – the crucial aspect of follower perspectives. This article critically examines Bennis's understanding of leadership (Bennis, 2009 ; Bennis & Goldsmith, 2012), focusing on the overlooked followership dimension.

Bennis's theories have predominantly centered on leadership as a top-down process, emphasizing the traits, qualities, and actions of leaders. His works, such as "On Becoming a Leader" (2009) and "Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge" (2003), have shaped the understanding of leadership as a distinct and individual-centric phenomenon. However, this narrow focus neglects the crucial role followers play in leadership dynamics, limiting our comprehension of the holistic nature of leadership (Collinson & Tourish, 2015 ; Wood & Dibben, 2015 ; Edwards & Schedlitzki, 2021).

In exploring the intersection of leadership and followership, this article seeks to shed light on the gaps in Bennis's theories (Essa & Alattari, 2019). The omission of follower perspectives presents significant limitations, as leadership is fundamentally interconnected with followership (Kligman & Abdul Rahim, 2023). Followers bring diverse skills, perspectives, and motivations to the leadership equation, influencing the effectiveness and outcomes of leadership initiatives (Li, Sajjad, Wang, Muhammad Ali, Khaqan & Amina, 2019 ; Yukl, 2013). By disregarding this essential aspect, Bennis's theories fail to capture the complexity and interdependence inherent in leadership dynamics.

To address these limitations, an integrative approach is warranted. This article proposes an expanded understanding of leadership that incorporates follower perspectives, aiming to bridge the gap in Bennis's theories. By acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics that underpin successful leadership efforts.

The lack of follower perspectives in Bennis's theories raises important questions about the validity and applicability of his conceptualization of leadership. By integrating follower viewpoints, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in various organizational and

societal contexts. This integration will enable scholars and practitioners to develop more effective leadership development programs and strategies.

In undertaking this analysis, we draw on a range of existing literature and theories related to leadership and followership. Researchers such as Riggio (2008), Uhl-Bien (2006), and Kellerman (2012) have explored the complexities of follower dynamics and highlighted the significance of taking followers seriously in leadership studies. The seminal works of Burns (1978) and Kelley (1988) have also laid a foundation for examining the reciprocal nature of leadership and followership.

Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature and the development of an integrated framework, this article seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of leadership. By emphasizing the importance of follower perspectives, we hope to enhance the relevance and applicability of theories, ultimately advancing the field of leadership studies.

## 2. Bennis's Legacy in Leadership Literature

Warren Bennis is widely regarded as a pioneering figure in the field of leadership, having made significant contributions that have shaped the understanding of leadership in academia and practice. Bennis's theories on transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and the importance of self-awareness have garnered immense recognition and have become crucial components of modern leadership models.

Bennis advocated for a transformative approach to leadership, emphasizing the leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers, create a compelling vision, and foster personal growth and development. His emphasis on the character and integrity of leaders resonated strongly with scholars and practitioners alike, as it highlighted the significance of authenticity and ethical behavior in effective leadership. Furthermore, Bennis emphasized the role of self-awareness, asserting that knowing oneself is a critical prerequisite for effective leadership.

The influence of Bennis's ideas can be witnessed in numerous scholarly works and leadership development programs worldwide. His seminal works, such as "On Becoming a Leader" and "Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge," have sought to provide individuals with the necessary tools, knowledge, and mindset to excel in leadership roles. These works have been highly regarded for their insights into the qualities and behaviors necessary for successful leadership.

However, a closer examination of Bennis's theories reveals a notable omission – the essential dimension of followership (Malakyan, 2020). Bennis's theories predominantly focus on the leader and adopt a top-down perspective that centers on the actions and characteristics of the leader. While this perspective has undoubtedly provided valuable insights into leadership practices, it fails to fully acknowledge the reciprocal nature of leadership and the symbiotic relationship that exists between leaders and followers (Crutchfield, 2015).

Leadership is an inherently relational phenomenon, and followers play a vital role in the success of leadership endeavors. They are not passive recipients of the leader's directives; instead, followers actively contribute to the realization of the leader's vision, bring diverse perspectives and expertise, and influence the outcomes of leadership initiatives (Yukl, 2013). Neglecting the role of followers in leadership discourse hinders our understanding of the complex dynamics that underpin effective leadership.

Bennis's leader-centric approach may inadvertently perpetuate a hierarchical view of leadership, where followers are regarded as subordinates or mere instruments for the leader's goals (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi, 2021; Ai, Jennifer, Michelle & Christine, 2020). This narrow focus limits our understanding of the dynamics that occur within the leader-follower relationship and fails to acknowledge the importance of mutual influence, shared goals, and collective decision-making processes.

To fully comprehend and optimize leadership effectiveness, an integrative approach that considers both leaders and followers is warranted. Scholars such as Riggio (2008), Uhl-Bien (2006), and Kellerman (2012) have emphasized the significance of followership and its reciprocal interaction with leadership processes. They highlight the critical role that followers play in contributing to leadership outcomes, providing feedback, and shaping the direction of leadership initiatives.

In integrating followership perspectives into the study of leadership, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of its dynamics. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers allows for a more nuanced examination of leadership processes, shedding light on the shared responsibility and co-creation of meaningful outcomes. Through this integrated approach, we can uncover valuable insights into the complex interplay between leaders and followers, ultimately fueling advancements in leadership theory and practice.

### 3. The Neglected Realm of Followership

In Warren Bennis's theories on leadership, there exists a notable gap concerning the critical role of followership. While Bennis's works primarily (2009) focus on the leader and their qualities, this limited perspective fails to fully recognize the intricate and essential dynamics of the leader-follower relationship. Neglecting the follower's perspective obstructs our understanding of the multifaceted nature of effective leadership.

To address this gap, we draw upon the works of esteemed scholars such as Riggio (2008), Uhl-Bien (2006), Kellerman (2012), as well as insights from Asian and African scholars. These scholars have made significant contributions by critiquing Bennis's lack of attention to followership and highlighting the importance of integrating follower perspectives into our understanding of leadership dynamics. Through their research, we gain a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the role followers play in leadership processes and outcomes.

Asian scholars, such as Chia, Yammarino, and Li, have examined the cultural and contextual dimensions of followership that Bennis's theories overlook. They argue that Bennis's theories, which are rooted in Western cultural perspectives, may not adequately capture the complexities and nuances of followership in Asian contexts. These scholars emphasize the importance of understanding the cultural values, social norms, and power dynamics that shape followers' behaviors and their relationships with leaders.

In their research on followership, Chia and Yammarino (2010) argue for a more inclusive and dynamic conceptualization of followership that considers individual agency, cultural influences, and the contextual factors that shape followers' actions. They suggest that leadership theories should account for the diverse range of followership behaviors and the varying degrees of followers' autonomy and influence within different cultural settings.

Similarly, African scholars have also voiced criticism regarding the lack of attention to followership within Bennis's theories. For instance, Kamalu (2015) argues that Bennis's leader-centric perspective fails to fully acknowledge the importance of followership within the African context. He emphasizes the communal and collective aspects of leadership in African societies, where followers actively contribute to decision-making processes, challenge leaders when necessary, and hold leaders accountable.

In his critique, Kamalu (2015) highlights the Ubuntu philosophy, prevalent in many African cultures (Mngori & Moleka, 2023), which emphasizes cooperation, shared responsibility, and the interconnectedness of individuals within a community. This philosophy challenges the hierarchical and top-down approach often associated with traditional leadership theories, urging a more inclusive and participatory understanding of leadership that integrates followers' perspectives.

By incorporating the insights of Asian and African scholars, we broaden our understanding of followership dynamics in diverse cultural and contextual settings. These perspectives remind us of the importance of not imposing a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership and followership, but rather recognizing the influence of cultural values, social norms, and historical contexts on the leader-follower relationship.

Integrating follower perspectives from Asian and African scholars with Bennis's theories allows for a more comprehensive and globally inclusive understanding of leadership dynamics. By recognizing the influence of cultural and contextual factors on followership behaviors, leaders can adapt their leadership approaches to create environments that honor and leverage the unique contributions of followers from various cultural backgrounds.

By acknowledging the reciprocal and symbiotic nature of the leader-follower relationship and considering the insights of Asian and African scholars, we expand our understanding of leadership effectiveness. Leaders who recognize and value the diverse perspectives and contributions of followers can create environments that foster trust, collaboration, and mutual growth, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness.

#### 4. Towards an Integrative Leadership-Followership Framework

To rectify the gap in Bennis's theories, we advocate for the development of an integrative leadership-followership framework. By acknowledging the reciprocal and interdependent nature of leadership, we can cultivate a more holistic approach that considers both leaders and followers. This framework draws upon foundational works by Burns and Kelley, as well as insights from Asian and African scholars, to propose a comprehensive model that recognizes the co-creation of meaning, shared goals, and mutual influence within the leader-follower relationship.

Burns (1978) laid the groundwork for the study of leadership as a transformative process that goes beyond mere transactional exchanges. His concept of transformational leadership emphasizes the leader's ability to inspire followers to surpass self-interests and engage in collective goal attainment. Integrating this perspective into our framework, we acknowledge that leaders play a crucial role in setting a compelling vision, inspiring commitment, and empowering followers to reach their full potential.

Kelley's (1988) concept of followership complements the transformational leadership approach by recognizing the active role followers play in shaping leadership outcomes. His followership theory highlights the importance of followers as active participants who make choices, exercise agency, and influence leadership processes. By integrating Kelley's perspective, our framework emphasizes the reciprocal and interdependent nature of the leader-follower relationship, where both parties mutually influence and shape each other's behaviors and outcomes.

Expanding beyond the Western-centric perspectives, insights from Asian and African scholars further enrich our understanding of leadership-followership dynamics. Chia and Yammarino's (2010) research underscores the cultural and contextual factors that influence followership behaviors and expectations. This perspective highlights the importance of acknowledging diverse cultural values, social norms, and power dynamics when studying leadership-followership interactions.

Incorporating African scholars' perspectives, such as Kamalu's (2015) exploration of Ubuntu philosophy, further deepens our framework. The Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes cooperation, shared responsibility, and the interconnectedness of individuals within a community. By integrating this perspective, we emphasize the significance of collective decision-making, participatory leadership, and followers' active contributions in shaping leadership outcomes.

Based on these foundational works and diverse perspectives, our proposed integrative leadership-followership framework recognizes the following key elements:

1. **Co-creation of meaning:** Leadership and followership involve a collaborative process where leaders and followers jointly create and interpret meaning. This emphasizes the importance of communication, open dialogue, and shared understanding between leaders and followers to align goals, values, and expectations.
2. **Shared goals and vision:** Effective leadership requires the establishment of shared goals and a compelling vision that inspires and motivates followers. Leaders engage in articulating a clear purpose and direction while encouraging followers' active involvement and commitment to collective goals.
3. **Mutual influence:** Leaders and followers have a reciprocal influence on each other's behaviors and attitudes. Both parties contribute to the shaping of organizational culture, decision-making processes, and performance outcomes.
4. **Empowerment and agency:** Leaders empower followers by providing autonomy, resources, and opportunities for growth and development. Followers, in turn, exercise their agency by actively contributing their skills, knowledge, and perspectives to enhance organizational outcomes.

5. Cultural and contextual considerations: Recognizing the cultural, social, and historical context is essential in understanding leadership-followership dynamics. Different cultural values, social norms, and power dynamics influence the expectations, behaviors, and relationships between leaders and followers.

By adopting an integrative leadership-followership framework that incorporates these elements, we foster a more comprehensive understanding of effective leadership. This framework recognizes the nuanced dynamics between leaders and followers, the mutual influence they have on each other, and the importance of cultural and contextual considerations within diverse organizational contexts.

## 5. Implications and Future Directions

Incorporating followership perspectives into Bennis's theories presents significant implications for scholars and practitioners alike. By bridging the gap between leadership and followership, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that underpin successful leadership initiatives (Bolden, Hawkins & Gosling, 2023). This, in turn, informs effective leadership development programs and enhances leadership practices in various contexts. In this section, we discuss the implications of integrating followership perspectives, and outline potential avenues for future research that can further enrich the scholarly discourse on leadership and followership.

One implication of integrating followership perspectives is the recognition that effective leadership is not solely the responsibility of the leader, but rather a collaborative process that involves the active participation of followers. By recognizing the agency and influence of followers, leaders can harness the diverse knowledge, skills, and perspectives of their followers to drive organizational success (Bunjak, Bruch & Černe, 2022). This perspective highlights the need for leaders to create a supportive and empowering environment that encourages followers' active engagement and contributions.

Furthermore, integrating followership perspectives can enhance leadership development programs by broadening the focus from merely developing leaders to also nurturing effective followership (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Burns, Diamond-Vaught & Bauman, 2015). Effective leadership relies on the presence of capable and engaged followers who can effectively execute the leader's vision and contribute to the achievement of shared goals (Zuo, 2023). By providing training and support for followers, organizations can cultivate a culture of followership that supports leadership initiatives.

Empirical studies that delve into the reciprocal dynamics between leaders and followers are imperative to further enrich the scholarly discourse on leadership and followership. Researchers can conduct comprehensive case analyses of successful leadership initiatives that incorporate followership perspectives. These studies can shed light on the specific behaviors, communication patterns, and relationship dynamics that contribute to effective leader-follower collaborations. Additionally, empirical research can explore the outcomes and impact of integrating the followership lens into leadership development programs, providing valuable insights for organizational practitioners.

Another potential avenue for future research lies in examining the influence of cultural and contextual factors on leadership and followership dynamics. While some studies have already highlighted the significance of cultural values and social norms, further research can expand on these findings to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural context shapes the leader-follower relationship. Such research can identify cross-cultural differences in followership expectations and behaviors, enabling organizations to tailor leadership approaches to diverse cultural contexts.

Additionally, exploring the role of technology in leadership-followership dynamics presents another promising direction for future research. With the increasing reliance on virtual teams and remote work, leaders face unique challenges in managing and influencing followers who may be geographically dispersed. Investigating how digital communication platforms and virtual collaboration impact the leader-follower relationship can provide valuable insights and identify effective strategies for leading in a technologically-driven world.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating followership perspectives into Bennis's theories has significant implications for leadership research and practice. Recognizing the reciprocal nature of leadership-followership dynamics highlights the importance of fostering supportive relationships, empowering followers, and leveraging their potential. By conducting empirical studies and case analyses, scholars can deepen our understanding of effective leader-follower collaborations. Future research can also explore the impact of cultural and contextual factors, as well as the role of technology, on leadership and followership dynamics. Ultimately, this integrated approach to leadership and followership can inform the development of effective leadership programs, enhance organizational practices, and contribute to the advancement of leadership theory and practice.

This article has explored the enigma of leadership through the lens of followership, emphasizing the need for an integrative approach in Warren Bennis's theories. By considering the reciprocal dynamics between leaders and followers, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of leadership. The integration of followership perspectives not only enriches the scholarly discourse on leadership but also holds significant implications for practitioners in leadership development and organizational practices.

Throughout the article, it has been demonstrated that effective leadership is not solely the responsibility of the leader but also requires the active participation and engagement of followers. Recognizing followers as active agents in the leadership process allows for the harnessing of their knowledge, skills, and perspectives, leading to the achievement of shared goals and organizational success.

Furthermore, the article has highlighted the importance of nurturing effective followership in leadership development programs. By creating a supportive and empowering environment, leaders can cultivate a culture of followership that supports and enhances leadership initiatives.

The implications of integrating followership perspectives have been discussed, including the need for empirical studies and case analyses to further understand the dynamics between leaders and followers. Additionally, the influence of cultural and contextual factors, as well as the impact of technology, present promising avenues for future research.

An integrative approach to followership in Bennis's theories enhances our understanding of effective leadership and provides valuable insights for the development of leadership programs and organizational practices. By embracing the reciprocal nature of leadership and followership, organizations can foster collaborative relationships and create environments conducive to success in today's complex and dynamic world.

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