Leadership as Social Influence: An Expanded View of Leadership Communication Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Communication is a topic frequently linked to leadership; however, the linkage often is limited to a view of communication as a tool to be employed by leaders in efforts to achieve particular purposes. The aim of this article is to provide a more expansive view of the communication process and its current and potential contributions to an understanding of leadership theory and dynamics. The article begins with an exploration of the ways that the study of communication intersects with the study of leadership itself, and then explores a number of communication concepts that are particularly important to the study and practice of leadership, but which have yet to be fully examined. As offered in this article, communication is considerably more than a leadership tool or strategy. Rather, it is an orientation, a world view, a way of understanding leadership that focuses more broadly on the process of social influence itself.

Interest in the nature of leadership has grown substantially in recent years in professional as well as academic literature, and the topic is of interest in multiple contexts—group, organizational, civic, political, educational, and spiritual, among others (Dinh et al., 2014). Communication is a topic frequently linked to leadership; however, the linkage often is limited to a view of communication as a strategic mechanism or technique to be employed by leaders in efforts to achieve particular purposes. While useful in a pragmatic sense, this view of communication fails to capture the broad theoretical significance for the study and practice of leadership. Recent scholarship is beginning to reexamine the important relationship between leadership and communication (e.g., Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b; Tourish, 2014), but there is a need to further explore and articulate these connections in a way that acknowledges the limitations of traditional models of human communication. The objective of this article is to interrogate multiple approaches to communication theory in an effort to more fully consider the impact these conceptions have on the study and practice of leadership. A further aim is to highlight the value of a more expansive view of the connections between communication and leadership.

The article begins with an exploration of the existing literature in communication theory and the ways that the study of communication intersects with the study of leadership. It continues with a synthesis of various communication concepts that are particularly important to the study and practice of leadership, but which have yet to be fully examined. Communication research provides an extremely useful and often underutilized lens for investigating leadership dynamics. That said, it is the case that many approaches that link communication and leadership view communication as a mechanism or strategic tool through which planned and intentional leadership outcomes occur. These conceptualizations also emphasize discursive activity and those outcomes associated primarily with formal roles or positions. A more nuanced understanding of communication theory leads to a considerably more expansive view of leadership—a view that envisions leadership within the context of social influence. This perspective points to the validity and value of focusing attention on not only those intentional verbal efforts by a leader but also on influence dynamics that are unplanned and accidental, involve nonverbal and material activity, and occur through informal and formal role-based behaviors. It is clear that the manner in which one conceptualizes communication has important implications for the way one understands and approaches leadership study and practice. The aim of this article is to examine the broader view of communication, as a force that is far

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more fundamental and critical than is implied when viewed as a tool or strategy. Our goal is to explore the sense of communication as an orientation, a world view, and an indispensable lens for advancing our understanding of the nature of leadership.

Overview of Leadership Literature

There are a number of ways to think about leadership, and the perspective one adopts in doing so matters. The way individuals approach leadership will influence how they think about the operation of influence in group, organizational, and other settings, and more generally how they make sense of the dynamics of social life. At a personal level, an individual's perspective on leadership has implications for how one understands his or her own contributions to leading others and to being led by others in a variety of contexts, including work, home, and the community. Finally, an individual's understanding of leadership may contribute both to the goals that are established and to the strategies adopted to achieve these goals—as well as the particular factors that become the focus of scholarly investigation. One's conceptualization of leadership informs both the study *and* practice of leadership.

Leadership has become a remarkably popular concept. Recent statistics from the Association for Talent Development suggest that nearly $20 billion of the nearly $160 billion spent on employee learning and development was spent on leadership education and development (Association for Talent Development, 2015). The subject is one of increasing popularity in both the professional and scholarly literatures. Given this, it is not surprising that many "folk theories" related to the topic have emerged and become widely accepted. On the one hand, these signal the importance attached to understanding leadership, yet they also reveal and contribute to what are often overly simplistic theories of leadership dynamics and practices. One such notion was the once-pervasive view that some individuals are natural leaders while others were not. This perspective—which continues to have some traction in popular discourse—is often accompanied by the presumption that leadership traits are an inherent part of an individual's personality or personal makeup. This conception also suggests that an individual's leadership capability is minimally a product of one's experiences, and therefore unlikely to be influenced by efforts to become more adept as a leader. While this was quite common in early theoretical conceptions—and still surfaces periodically in popular discourse—the general view now is that a person's natural leadership capacities are honed through experience and that any of us can acquire enhanced leadership capability if we dedicate ourselves to that goal (Northouse, 2015; Parks, 2005; Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010).

Reflecting the general interest in this topic, the scholarly literature today is replete with definitions of and approaches to the study and practice of leadership, presenting what can be categorized as classical, contemporary, communication, and competency approaches:

- *Classical approaches*—Traditional approaches to the study of leadership that include trait (Bass, 1990; Jago, 1982), skills (Katz, 1955), style (Blake & McCanse, 1991; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939), and situational theories (Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969)
- *Contemporary approaches*—Modern approaches to the study of leadership theory and practice, including transformational (Bass & Avolio, 1994), authentic (George, 2003), and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002)
- *Competency approaches*—Approaches to leadership that focus on the ability of successful leaders to acquire a portfolio of knowledge and skills that they are able to apply strategically (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Kotter, 2012; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Ruben, 2012; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Smith, 2007; Wisniewski, 1999)
- *Communication approaches*—Approaches to leadership that illustrate how communication and leadership are inseparable and that foreground the role of communication theory in understanding the dynamics of leadership or leadership influence (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, in press; Witherspoon, 1997)

Our focus in this article is specifically on communication-oriented approaches, and there is no doubt that this perspective and associated scholarship has contributed a great deal to a view of leadership as a social, discursive, purposeful, and co-constructed phenomenon. However, it is also the case that the emphasis on discourse often fails to take into consideration the material and nonverbal dynamics of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007). In another example of recent scholarship, Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, and Johnson (2011) offer a comprehensive "megamodel" of the leadership system that integrates diverse theoretical perspectives such as those offered above. Their review of the literature leads to the development of a common language across theories—the loci of leadership (where leadership "comes from") and the mechanisms of leadership (how leadership is transmitted) (Eberly, Johnson, Hernandez, & Avolio, 2011). This comprehensive model provides a helpful integration of a broad array of perspectives on the nature of leadership and an inclusive way of thinking about leadership as a system. It also offers a common language for understanding the complex leadership system. Despite the many contributions of this megamodel,

the model appears to reinforce an assumption about the linear nature of communication—one where leadership is transmitted. This transmission-centered focus prevents us from adopting a more meaning-centered view of leadership communication. The absence of a meaning-centered focus deters us from understanding influence outcomes as co-constructed by leaders and followers through interaction, and from recognizing leadership as inherently a collaborative act. These limitations are not trivial and lead us to identify a need for revisiting some of the foundational communication theory with the goal of advancing leadership theory and practice to more fully take account of the nuances and realities of human communication.

Human Communication

Fully understanding communication and its relevance for leadership theory and practice requires an abandonment of many of the assumptions made about one's everyday experience and indeed some popular understandings of the process as portrayed in the professional and academic theory related to leadership. In much the same way that one can easily take for granted the dynamics of breathing and the assumption that one understands how the process works, so too, it is very easy to assume a full understanding of the nature of communication because of our familiarity with the process. But as Thayer (1968) aptly noted in his foundational work in this area,

> We can't afford to assume we understand all there is to be known about even the most elementary and obvious aspects of human communication. . . . If we do, there is no way for us to communicate very successfully about communication. (p. 5)

The classical and most pervasive view of communication suggests that the process involves a sender who transmits a message to a receiver, who in turn translates, interprets, and acts on that message. The further presumption is that the message sent generally equals message received (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). This paradigm (Ruben & Stewart, 2016) has not only guided and informed the way communication is commonly viewed but has also helped inform the way in which leadership dynamics have been studied.

Alternative views of communication make clear that it is a considerably more complex phenomenon than implied by the pervasive traditional conceptualization. As Thayer (2003) and others have noted, communication is one of the two fundamental activities of all living things (Miller, 1965; Ruben, 2003; Ruben & Kim, 1975). Indeed, it can be defined as the "sine qua non," or an essential condition of the behavioral sciences (Thayer, 2003). As Thayer (1968) points out, "The essence of being human is thus communicating-to and being communicated-with" (p. 18). Vickers

(1967) describes the fundamental nature of communication this way:

> I'm impressed by the fundamental nature of . . . [the communication process]. Insofar as I can be regarded as human, it is because I was claimed at birth as a member of a communication network, which programmed me for participation in itself. (p. 272)

Ruben (2005) extends this perspective to define communication as "the process through which the social fabric of relationships, groups, organizations, societies, and world order—and disorder—is created and maintained" (p. 294). To be human is to engage in communication—and, perhaps even more relevant to this current essay, to lead is to communicate. Communication, a "universal human experience," is critical to social behavior (Thayer, 1968, 2003) and is essential to leadership theory and practice when one thinks in terms of a mechanistic view, and even more so when viewing leadership as a more fundamental life process envisioned by Thayer and others.

In everyday ways of thinking about communication, it is quite natural to assume that the process involves the creation and transmission of verbal messages to intended receivers, thereby bringing about shared understanding. This idea is often taken to suggest that it is meaning rather than simply aural or visual cues that are exchanged in communication—an understanding that overlooks the highly active process through which both sender and receiver must construct the meaning these cues have for them based on past experience, culture, previous learning, context, their relationship history, and a number of other factors. Further examination reveals that communication involves a complex arrangement of verbal and nonverbal messages, intentional and unintentional messages, planned and unplanned messages. The messages sent are seldom interpreted in the same ways as messages received, leading Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) to note, "one cannot *not* communicate" (p. 49), which indicates that the study and practice of communication extends beyond talk-in-interaction and must also take account of the potential communicative significance of that which is *not* said. To the extent that fundamental communication thinking is limited, those limitations quite naturally carry over to a characterization of the dynamics of communication at play in leadership processes.

Leadership Communication: Classical Linear, Interactional, and Systems Models

Classical Linear Model

In popular and classical writings on communication, leadership is thought about and described in terms of the intentional

creation of messages with particular influence outcomes in mind. This view suggests that if a leader intends to accomplish a particular goal or communicate a specific message, he or she creates and transmits the message and the process seemingly plays out in a very linear and predictable manner.

Essentially, such a view reflects a one-way, cause-and-effect–oriented characterization of the communication and influence process. Based on a synthesis of the literature, for example, Hackman and Johnson (2013) define leadership in this way: "Leadership is human (symbolic) communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (p. 11). Based on this understanding of leadership, a failure in communication may ultimately lead to a failure in leadership itself—in some sense they are viewed as one in the same. Consistent with this perspective are the numerous training programs, curricula, and workshop requirements that increasingly emphasize communication as a critical competency for leadership itself—by following a prescriptive recipe for "effective communication," one may achieve intended influence outcomes as a leader. This approach to human communication is very intuitive, easy to understand, and appealing in many respects, yet it also greatly oversimplifies the nature of communication and its relationship to leadership. For that reason, it is quite limited in theoretical and practical terms.

As much as the "transmission," "exchange," or "sharing of information" is a familiar and customary way of describing communication, as suggested earlier, this portrayal oversimplifies and actually obscures some critical aspects of the process—and leads to an incomplete understanding of the dynamics associated with social influence. Once again, the reality of communication is that seldom does message sent equal message received. Neither communication nor influence operates in such a predictable manner. Moreover, through a broader perspective, the determination of if, whether, and when there are "failures" or "breakdowns" in communication shifts from rather simple and straightforward questions that are associated with a transmission orientation to becoming matters of a remarkably complex nature in theory and practice. Potentially important in such "failures" or breakdowns are a broad array of factors associated with a leader, potential followers and their goals and priorities, messages created and their interpretation, media selected, the history of relationships, the context in which communication occurs, and many additional factors. Historically, discussions of leadership communication—which imply that the leader and his or her message have a direct and controlling influence on message receivers—have reinforced this misleading way of thinking—and are apt to attribute to a leader far too much credit for leadership communication "successes" and also hold leaders far too accountable for "failures." The uncritical acceptance of this view of influence is likely one of the factors that has led some authors to argue that the influence of a leader's impact can be overrated, with some going so far as to describe this inclination as the romanticization of leadership itself (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987).

Interactional Model

The classic view has a number of limitations as it relates to describing communication and leadership, and the relationship between the two. Unlike the linear model, an interactional perspective attempts to capture more of the complexity and two-way influence between a sender and receiver—or, for the purpose of this article, a leader and follower. The interactional perspective recognizes that communication is not a one-way process, but rather is best understood as "a multidirectional phenomenon with no distinguishable beginning or end" (Ruben, 2003, p. 95). Related to the study of leadership, it highlights the idea that meaning is not easily controlled by the leader, but rather results from interactions between leaders *and* followers. It also suggests that the greater the extent of mismatch between expectations, attitudes, and values, the less the likelihood that message-sent will equal message-received (Ruben & Stewart, 2016).

An interactional view of communication reminds us that only a fraction of the influence that occurs in communication situations is the result of these kinds of purposeful and intentional acts. Multiplicities of factors are at play in even the most basic situation, and the net result is that the communication process associated with influence is far more complex and unpredictable than suggested by classical one-way models. Indeed, many of the messages that make a difference in communication and influence situations are unplanned and unpredicted, nonverbal as well as very verbal—and the product of ongoing dynamics rather than a single message-sending/message-receiving event. It becomes clear that these key points are not well captured by the linear classic model. Unlike the limited one-way linear model, the interactional model expands the focus to a more complex two-way interchange between sender(s) and receiver(s). Just as the sender communicates with the receiver, the receiver is communicating reciprocally, sometimes simultaneously, with the sender. Communication may include both verbal and nonverbal messages. For example, as a speaker addresses an audience, members of the audience may express their feedback through verbal (e.g., cheers, applause, laughter) and nonverbal (e.g., yawns, tears, crossed arms) reactions.

Although representing an important advance in the way communication is represented, the model still may be interpreted as suggesting that communication consists of the exchange, sharing, or transmission of information. Even with added elements of the interactional model, the complexity of communication and the critical issues for understanding the dynamics of leadership—particularly those

related to meaning, message selection, interpretation, retention and the array of additional factors associated with influence—are not fully explored (Ruben & Stewart, 2016).

Systems Model

A systems view of communication overcomes many limitations of these previous models and more adequately captures the complexity of leadership communication and social influence. This view of communication focuses directly on the way people create, convey, select, and interpret the messages that inform and shape their lives—viewing communication as a basic life process rather than an exchange of information or meaning between people (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). This perspective recognizes that some of these messages are intentionally created; others are produced accidentally. Some messages are constructed to achieve specific influence goals or intentions; others may be unconsciously created by their initiator with no specific purpose in mind. Some messages are created in the moment in face-to-face settings; others occur at remote times and places and are conveyed into a particular setting via print or electronic media, some are verbal and others are behavioral or artifactual (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). And some messages that can be very important to communication outcomes have inanimate sources—a sunset, illness, or a natural disaster, for example (Ruben & Stewart, 2016).

This view of communication takes into account the fact that throughout any message-sending/message-receiving transaction, each party brings his or her own unique "maps" and "personal luggage" to the interaction—each individual's unique needs, values, attitudes, goals, aspirations, styles, education, cultures, physical and emotional abilities and disabilities, life history, and present life circumstances. These "belongings" travel with an individual and influence every aspect of the way messages are created (or not), made sense of (or not), and reacted to (or not) (Ruben, 2016). Thayer (1968) describes these "belongings" as the "needs, values, expectations, attitudes, and goals that are brought to every communication encounter. These predispositions, susceptibilities, and take-into-account-abilities influence the outcome of the interaction and are equivalent to our individual make-meaningful-abilities" (p. 36). Often the communication "luggage" of one individual does not align all that well with the expectations, attributes, outlooks, states, and orientations of others with whom they are engaging. Generally speaking, the greater the extent of mismatch, the less the likelihood that message-sent will equal message-received (Ruben, 2016; Ruben & Stewart, 2016).

This view of communication underscores the limitations of the linear and meaning-transmission or information exchange views of communication and reminds us that single messages and single message-sending events seldom yield momentous message-reception outcomes. Rather, communication and social influence are parts of an ongoing process through which messages wash over individuals—somewhat analogous to waves repeatedly washing on the shore. Over time these messages shape the sensibilities and responses of receivers, much as waves shape a shoreline, but individual messages are unlikely to have great consequence. The exceptions to this subtle process are those rare, life-changing messages that can have a tsunami-like impact on message reception.

Leadership–Communication Connections

A systems understanding of human communication theory accommodates and also moves well beyond the limiting view of communication as simply a mechanism, tool, or strategy to be used by leaders, extending that view with a concept that defines communication as the foundation for a rich and differentiated understanding of leadership. Perhaps most fundamentally, a systems view of communication offers a radically different view than other perspectives as to the extent to which a leader is able to exert direct, predictable, and controllable influence on followers. In this perspective, leadership and influence outcomes are understood to be a consequence of a complex set of factors that include the relationship between leader(s), follower(s), message(s), and context(s) and the interpretive activities of those involved.

For those who aspire to lead others, the communication-centered ideas of attention and agenda-setting, the management of meaning/framing, and sensemaking/sensegiving fit well within a systems view of communication. These three tools, which will be defined and explained momentarily, all benefit from an acknowledgment that the leadership–communication process is not a matter of unidirectional influence; rather, building from the systems model, the ways that people—functioning in the somewhat arbitrarily designated roles of "leader" and "follower"—create, convey, select, and attach meaning to the messages that inform and shape their lives are much more complex, dynamic, and unpredictable (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). These concepts are each based on the notion that, leadership–followership dynamics are influenced by followers, the message, and the setting as well as by factors both within and beyond the leader's control. Building on the systems framework, the following section will highlight key concepts related to these three communicative leadership tools.

Attention and Agenda-Setting

Organizational leaders play an important role in influencing items that receive attention. This phenomenon, known also as agenda-setting, is an important communicative tool for leaders in all settings. In their seminal work on the subject,

McCombs and Shaw (1972) studied the role of the mass media during the 1968 presidential election. As the authors hypothesized, "The mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (p. 177). From this perspective, for its audiences, the news can shape not only *what* to think about, but also *how* to think about it (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The theory and research on the topic point to potential parallels between the mass media and leaders as those who may directly and indirectly determine the items that become prominent agenda items for their audiences, through a repetitive communication process analogous to waves pounding against the shoreline. The repetitive "sound bites" and themes offered by hosts of popular cable news programs, for example, can shape what and how regular viewers and listeners think about specific news stories. This process is not immediate, nor is there a guarantee that any message communicated will be received in an intended manner, but is often a consequence of waves of messages delivered over time that probably are substantially increased.

There are often myriad issues competing for attention which presents an initial challenge. As suggested in the public policy literature, recognizing a problem is important to attract significant attention; however, recognition alone typically lacks the potential for influence necessary to place an item on the political agenda (Kingdon, 1984). In order for an issue to receive broader attention, three streams of influence—a recognition of the problem, a proposed solution, and the political will—must converge to create a "window of opportunity" (Kingdon, 1984). As these three components come together in the political sphere, the window of opportunity—and associated susceptibilities—opens and increases the likelihood individuals will attend to, interpret, and act on a defined problem in a predictable manner—an insight which can be readily translated into leadership strategy and practice across a variety of settings. Additionally, effective leaders are able to identify the shifting "windows of opportunity" among their intended constituencies, to elevate items to the status of an agenda item, and to influence the ways in which others think about those agenda items. Note, however, that individual leader's behaviors are "effective" in this way to the extent that they are able to align their messages with preexisting or cultivated susceptibilities, and these dynamics and outcomes subsequently build on the communication concepts presented in this article.

The Management of Meaning and Framing

As noted earlier, the transmission model of human communication neglects the role of meaning, which remains one of the most fundamental aspects of human communication (Axley, 1984). More contemporary views of communication focus attention on interpretive processes and meaning,

and suggest that leadership can, in fact, be described as the "management of meaning" (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). This meaning-centered view of communication presents leadership as a consequence, result, or outcome of collective meaning making (Barge, 2007; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Parker, 2005). According to Smircich and Morgan (1982), "In understanding the way leadership actions attempt to shape and interpret situations to guide organizational members into a common interpretation of reality, we are able to understand how leadership works to create an important foundation for organized activity" (p. 260). Drawing on the work of Pondy (1978), Entman (1993), and Weick (1979), Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) define framing as

> the ability to shape the meaning of a subject, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations. (p. 3)

It is through communication, conceptualized thusly, that social influence occurs (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). As Fairhurst (2009) suggests, "Even if leadership actors cannot always control events, they are still viewed as having the ability to control the context under which events are seen" (p. 1608). According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), "Leaders operate in uncertain, sometimes chaotic environments that are partly of their own creation: while leaders do not control events, they do influence how events are seen and understood" (p. xi). Leaders are seen as having the ability to co-create the contexts, situations, and opportunities to which they and others must respond (Fairhurst, 2009). The skill of framing has the potential to encourage others to accept one meaning or interpretation over another. During unprecedented and chaotic moments of organizational disruption, for example, it is often the leader's goal to frame the situation in a way that builds trust, confidence, and hope; yet there is no guarantee that this frame will be accepted and understood, and agreed on by the others for reasons that are understandable given the nature of human communication.

A more complex understanding of the communication process allows for an exploration into framing that goes beyond the transmission of a particular frame; rather, the leader's frame is very much shaped and molded by the demands of the situation and by the needs of the potential followers. Not only is "talk" the way in which leaders accomplish many specific tasks (Gronn, 1983), but it is through communication—and framing, more specifically—that leaders are able to be influential in constructing realities with and for those whom one hopes to lead (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). This impact is often the result of many messages, including verbal message patterns and also a stream

of reinforcing nonverbal messages including actions, artifacts, appearances, and gestures communicated over time.

Sensemaking/Sensegiving

Of the various communication concepts that advance our understanding of the theory and dynamics of leadership, none is more relevant than sensemaking. The focus of the study of sensemaking is on how people interpret and give coherence to their everyday experiences (Connaway, Radford, Dickey, Williams, & Confer, 2008; Dervin, 1992, 1998). Humans live in a world of gaps and the way that one bridges these gaps reflects the act of sensemaking (Dervin, 1992, 1998). It is through the act of sensemaking that human actors "structure the unknown" (Waterman, 1990, p. 41) as a way of constructing that which then becomes sensible to those whom one leads (Weick, 1995). In his analysis of the seven properties of sensemaking, Weick describes sensemaking as a process that is retrospective, grounded in identity construction, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. An underlying point of significance—and a fundamental building block of social constructionist perspectives on communication and human behavior—is that all of us are confronted with the need to make sense of our environments and the people and circumstances we encounter (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The process of sensemaking involves more than interpretation. According to Weick (1995), "Sensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery" (p. 8). An emphasis on sensemaking also directs attention to a consideration of the role of communication and context in understanding the actions and behaviors of leaders (Fairhurst, 2009; Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Thayer (1988) extends the phenomenon of sensemaking into the domain of leadership, while also highlighting the importance of sensegiving as a leadership function—both of which reflect the leader's communicative roles as author and creator:

> [A leader is] one who alters or guides the manner in which his followers "mind" the world by giving it a compelling "face." A leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the *meaning* of that which they do by recreating it in a different form, a different "face," in the same way that a pivotal painter or sculptor or poet gives those who follow him (or her) a different way of "seeing"—and therefore saying and doing and knowing in the world. A leader does not tell it "as it is"; he tells it as it *might be*, giving what "is" thereby a different "face." . . . The leader is a sense-*giver*. The leader always *embodies* the possibilities of escape from what might otherwise appear to us to be incomprehensible, or from what might otherwise appear to us to be a chaotic, indifferent, or incorrigible world—one over which we have no ultimate control. (pp. 250, 254)

This extended passage captures the leader's dual role as sensemaker and sensegiver—underscoring, once again, the interdependency of leader–follower functions. In their introductory work on the subject, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) suggest that "the sensemaking phases are those that deal primarily with understanding processes and the sensegiving phases are those that concern attempts to influence the way that another party understands or makes sense" (p. 443). Leaders, through communication, make sense of their environment and share this interpretation with those whom they lead. The sensemaking/sensegiving process is especially critical during times of uncertainty, change, or crisis (Gigliotti, forthcoming). It is during these moments, when would-be followers are most in need of help in making sense of their experiences—that would-be leaders are able to be influential by offering a sound explanation or interpretation of the uncertain environment. Once again, the potential for successful leadership communication depends as much on followers and their needs, susceptibilities, and interpretations as it does on the efforts of leaders. In their roles as sensegivers, leaders often play simultaneous roles as interpreters, agenda setters, and framers—all of which are informed by an alternative view of leadership communication.

An Expanded View of Leadership Communication

Attention and agenda-setting, the management of meaning/framing, and sensemaking/sensegiving are robust ways of applying communication systems theory in leadership practice; the concepts are helpful both for enhancing and tempering our understanding of practices that are useful in carrying out our strategic intention. At the same time, an understanding of these concepts furthers a theoretical understanding of the fundamental aspects of the communication–leadership relationship. They serve as conceptual tools that allow for a better understanding of leadership as a co-constructed process of social influence that involves communication that is verbal and nonverbal, planned and unplanned, intentional or accidental, formal and informal, and used for purposes that may be "good" or "evil" (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, in press).

Consistent also with an expanded view of communication, is what Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014b) describe as an evolution from what the authors consider to be more individual and cognitive (postpositivist) approaches to leadership study toward more recent social constructionist views of leadership. One may also consider the shift from a classical linear communication and interactional model to the more complex and multifaceted systems model as another critical component of this evolution. This pivot toward a social constructionist understanding of leadership lays out a new research agenda for leadership studies.

Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014b) advance this agenda by articulating four directions for leadership scholarship, including (a) the comanagement of meaning, (b) influential acts of human and material organizing, (c) a site of power and influence, and (d) alive with the potential for moral accountability, reflexivity, and change. The focus on leadership as social influence, as presented in this article, aligns with and further advances newer directions for communication–leadership scholarship. For those interested in extending this body of work further, the two examples that follow illustrate the utility of communication theory in explaining leadership dynamics.

Critical Role of Followers

From a systems perspective, followers play an instrumental role in making leadership work, so much so that in many respects leadership and followership are inseparable concepts and the outcomes of communication are defined as much by followers as they are by leaders.

The implication of this view of human communication is that at any moment in time an individual is being bombarded with messages of varying sorts, intentions, and origins—including even "intrapersonally" sourced reflective messages generated by the individual. All in some sense compete for one's attention (Ruben, 2003). The act of selecting a particular message, making sense of that message, and responding in specific ways is a complex, personal, and subjective process, and quite difficult to predict, let alone control—even in the case of what would seem to be very simple messages with straightforward intentions. A profound consequence of this perspective is that outcomes of communication are not easily shaped or controlled by leaders, but rather are guided by the predispositions, susceptibilities, and take-into-accountabilities of the followers (Thayer, 1968).

Thus, a communication-systems perspective provides an alternative way of understanding the dynamics of social influence. It helps explain why many leadership and social influence outcomes are often unplanned, unintentional, unpredicted, and unpredictable. It also helps explain the reasons why observers of leadership dynamics could well conclude that the impact of leadership activity is often overstated and romanticized. The systems way of understanding communication focuses less on the intentions or message-sending acts or actions of a leader and more broadly on the broad array of factors and dynamics associated with communication and social influence.

Another way to talk about the leader–follower relationship is in terms of co-creation (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). This phraseology suggests that the nature of leadership and influence outcomes are the result of the leader–follower relationship. Indeed, it is the decisions of "followers" to attend to, support, endorse, follow, reinforce, or work for an individual that allows the individual to be a leader. No followership implies that there is no leadership. The profundity of this notion is captured succinctly by a quotation from Benjamin Hooks, former director of the NAACP: "If you think you are leading and turn around to see no one following, then you are just taking a walk." In a very real sense, leaders and leadership are defined more by the actions of followers than leaders. Drawing on Fairhurst (2007), Barge and Fairhurst (2008) view leadership "as a co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them" (p. 232). So fundamental is this relationship—in theory and practice—that these two concepts are become inseparable.

Leader as Docent

The systems conceptualization of the leader's role might be compared with the role of docent. First and foremost, there is no leading to be done if there are no visitors to a gallery or museum. The docent-as-leader takes on a potentially meaningful role only if there are visitors who come with an intention to look, listen, or learn. There is no one to lead if the museum is empty, so the fundamental leadership task may be identifying and attracting an audience. While shepherding visitors through the respective galleries of an art museum, the docent serves as a kind of tour guide. As such, the docent, through the act of agenda setting, has the opportunity to expose patrons to a number of messages—those present in the museum itself and those in the accompanying narrative. Depending on the appetites, interests, motivations, and take-into-account-abilities of the patrons, this leader–follower interaction has the potential to shape the sensemaking patterns of patrons in various ways. Through various communication and framing strategies, leaders make sense of a situation for themselves, and then they lead others through that environment in a way they hope will shape their interpretation of the situation—or the artwork—for those who are seeking some type of framework with which to make sense of their experience. The docent-as-leader is a guide, and despite a desire to fully share a certain vision on a tour, a broad range of factors beyond the docent's knowledge or control are at play. Some of these factors might be the knowledge and interest level of the tourists, concerns about the need to expedite the tour to arrive on time for a dinner reservation, difficulty hearing the guide's comments from where they are located in the group, distracting comments by others in the group, a preoccupying physical condition, financial pressures at home—all messages competing with the carefully planned leadership efforts of the dutiful and dedicated docent. Understanding communication theory, particularly a systems approach to communication, allows—compels—one to explore how to

make sense of the complexities of the art gallery or any context in which one aspires to be an influential leader.

Like the docent, leaders may take on a number of different identities depending on the context and situation, including, but not limited to, storytellers, interpreters, translators, agents of change, counselors, spokespeople, visionaries, impression managers, and cheerleaders. These individuals are validated as leaders and their efforts are proclaimed to be successful to the extent that they and their messages are attended to, considered meaningful one way or another, and generally connected to the needs, aspirations, experiences, and goals of individuals, groups, organizations, or other public and societal collectives.

Without followership there can be no leadership. To those who understand the underlying dynamics, there is the ironic recognition that the effectiveness of the leadership is not a result of the leader's actions alone, nor of the needs and desires of followers, but rather at the intersection between the two. Often, leadership may best be understood as that which occurs when an individual is able to analyze, predict, and fulfill the susceptibilities, needs, and expectations of those who he or she would like to "lead." Additionally, this view of leadership is best understood—and perhaps only understood—if we move beyond traditional ways of understanding the phenomenon in pursuit of an expanded, communication-centered conceptualization.

Leadership Communication Principles and Practice

The following principles are consistent with—and take on particular significance in light of—the concepts presented in this article—concepts that emphasize a systems view of communication and influence, concepts that highlight the critical co-determining role of both leader and follower, and concepts that draw directly on the three communication-centered leadership tools presented in this essay—attention and agenda-setting, the management of meaning/framing, and sensemaking/sensegiving. We believe it is very important for research in leadership communication to explore the implications of these important communication–leadership connections and concepts.

1. *Leaders "cannot not communicate"* (Watzlawick et al., 1967). While discussions of leadership communication typically focus on the creation and delivery of intentional, verbal messages with particular ends in mind, Watzlawick et al. (1967) remind us that human communication and human influence are best understood as a far more complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The words of a leader may signal that individual's effort to set an agenda or frame an event. As important as these verbal messages may be, in many cases nonverbal messages

may be of greater import. Moreover, some messages may be attended to while others are ignored, some messages are interpreted more or less as intended while others may be interpreted in a wholly different way, some messages will be remembered while others will be forgotten, and some messages will be acted on and others not. Additionally, intentions are being imagined, motives are being attributed, and a willingness to follow is being determined. In these sensemaking and sensegiving activities, verbal messages are important sources of potential influence; yet one must not underestimate the importance of both silence and nonverbal messages. As but one example, consider the potential influences of one's actions as a leader in the context of planning and conducting a meeting. Regularly arriving on time or early as opposed to being late; distributing an agenda several days before meetings—and following the agenda—as opposed to verbally announcing the agenda topics at the beginning of the meeting and introducing various additional topics that come to mind as the meeting progresses; being visibly attentive while others are speaking compared with frequently checking your phone; being responsive versus being defensive when questions are asked, all may be messages of significance in the multifaceted dynamics of influence for those in attendance. Another example might involve the decision to not show up for a nationally televised political debate, where the absence of participation may be a far more influential message than any form of participation might have.

2. *Leadership communication is a process that involves the negotiation of—rather than the transmission of—meaning*. Viewing communication in a linear fashion has the advantage of focusing influence efforts on the leader, the message, and the medium for disseminating the message—all elements that are envisioned as being controllable and predictable by the leader. But this perspective, while comfortable, generally fails the test of providing either control or predictability of outcomes. Despite the attendant discomfort and complexity, leadership communication is better understood as a co-constructed process between leader and follower that concerns itself with the way people create, convey, select, and interpret the messages that inform and shape their lives—viewing communication as a basic life process of constructing meaning rather than an exchange of messages between people (Ruben, 2003, 2011; Thayer, 1968).

3. *Communication dynamics create a history that shapes and guides future influence efforts*. The ebb and flow of messages, along with the interpretations that result create a leadership–followership history

that builds on itself and cannot be reversed. This relationship shapes current meanings and creates the foundation for future communication encounters—a bell that cannot-be un-rung, perceptions which have lasting impact and influence. Thus, even as individuals strive to shape interactions and outcomes, they are engaged in creating a communication landscape and legacy that—for better or worse—provide a backdrop and context for all that follows.

4. *All leadership communication is intercultural.* Leadership communication—like all communication is essentially an intercultural phenomenon in which one's own cultural baggage—personal experiences, language patterns, religion, family history, work history, values, beliefs, and so on—provide a unique set of cultural filters through which all messages to and from others must flow. These differences are both predictable and unpredictable sources of infidelity in many, if not most, communication and influence situations, again pointing to the necessity of adopting a more nuanced view of the dynamics and pragmatics of leadership influence efforts, and recognizing the fundamental sense in which meanings and social influence are co-constructed by leaders and followers.

5. *Leadership communication always has both content and relational consequences.* What one says and does matters both in terms of the content of the messages sent and received, and the leader–follower relationship that is being formed in the act of communication. While more explicit attention is typically devoted to the content of messages, and to the informative or persuasive goals one has, an awareness of the concomitant relational consequences of all communication events is an important part of leadership communication—perhaps more so than a traditional focus on message content. Here, we are reminded of the central role of the follower in defining one's success as a leader. Relational functions are also vital because they shape the context in which subsequent communication occurs.

6. *Leadership functions occur in all social decision making.* Whether the decision is where to go to lunch or what the topic of hallway conversation should be at a given moment, leadership–followership dynamics are continually at play. These informal contexts can be extremely important to the attributions of colleagues, perhaps as much as or more than those taking place in meetings and formal decision-making settings. These relationships in turn will provide the foundation for subsequent communication, so leaders must not take lightly the importance of cultivating these formal and informal relationships. These situations, where informal leadership dynamics are at play, also provide an important training ground for leadership theorists and practitioners wishing to better understand the dynamics of social influence, the key factors playing a role in influence outcomes, and the personal options available for influencing those outcomes.

7. *Leadership opportunities are not something that one waits for; rather, they are situations leaders must create* (Stone, 2015). A corollary notion is that opportunities do not simply emerge and present themselves; but rather, they must be identified and defined, as such, through sensemaking, and the ability to do so may well be a necessary capability of outstanding leaders. Beyond defining such situations and constituencies as prospects for significant impact, successful leaders must be able to act on potential opportunities and encourage others to do so as well through sensegiving. Here again, the role of communication in the practice of leadership is indispensable. Developing competencies in assessing a situation to determine with whom, when, and how one can become a successful leader may be among the most important leadership knowledge- and skill-sets one needs to learn.

8. *There is often a gap between what leaders know and intend, and how they behave and the impact of their actions.* Despite one's best efforts, there is often a gap between one's intentions and aspirations and their subsequent actions—between the leader you see and the leader others see. Assume there are gaps—everyday instances where intentions will not be well displayed behaviorally, nor received as was hoped for at the outset. A commitment to reflective practice (Schön, 1983) provides the potential for self-guided leadership theory building and personal development. Developing and using mechanisms for monitoring one's leadership and leadership/followership relationships are valuable components for increased leadership effectiveness.

9. *If leaders want others to be committed to solutions, they need to engage those individuals in naming and framing the problem.* Consistent with the notion of co-creation, shared leader–follower engagement is quite essential to a mutual commitment, a sense of shared ownership, and ultimately a successful follow-through on desired outcomes. Language and a genuine sense of verbal and behavioral engagement characterized by "we," "us," and "our" vision, goals, projects, and accomplishments are far more likely to strengthen leadership–followership collaboration than "I," "me," or "my." By recognizing the central role that followers can play in defining problems and identifying possible solutions, leaders may be less likely to romanticize their view of leadership

influence, while increasing the potential impact they may actually have in a situation. In so many of the most pressing of societal issues, shared ownership of the leadership products and processes seems essential to effective and engaged problem solving.

10. *Initiating the learning process for the group builds stronger leader–follower collaboration than does simply describing the conclusion one has reached through their own learning process*. For those who aspire to influence others, it is important to recognize the limited knowledge or interest often present among those whom one wishes to influence. Often the challenge is to use communication to lead potential followers through a process the recreates that which led the leader to his or her position, understanding, and sense of need. The art of framing and the management of meaning remind us of the value of guiding others to replicate the leader's learning process for potential followers, rather than simply advocating for the adoption of his or her conclusions through communication efforts.

11. *Leadership training and development efforts are subject to the same communication issues and challenges as leadership itself*. Similar to the romanticization and oversimplification of popular discourse around the concept of leadership itself, there is a tendency to romanticize the value and direct impact of leadership training and development programs. This inclination reflects the limited perspective suggested by the notion that message sent is equal to the message received. One's participation in a one-time leadership training initiative, albeit valuable for certain purposes, clearly provides no guarantee of fostering significant and lasting enhanced leadership capabilities. There is a related inclination to often overvalue the specific training program because of a failure in recognizing the episodic nature of the event. Drawing on the imagery offered earlier, one wave is unlikely to dramatically shape the shoreline. Rather, the shoreline—or individual leader's perspective, knowledge, and skills—are shaped by the influence of numerous waves over time. To this point, leaders are more likely to be socialized through the culture of their organization, learning from the formal and informal, intended and unintended influences of the leaders around them.

Conclusion

The connections between communication thinking and the study and practice of leadership are important. Traditionally, that connection has focused on the formal leader and the specific mechanisms and strategies employed to influence others, all of which are recognized as involving communication. Such approaches merely scratch the surface in exploring the potential relevance of communication to leadership. In fact, such applications are misleading to the extent that they suggest a linear relationship between leadership message sending and leadership influence outcomes. This view is not informed by the breadth of knowledge we now possess about the nature of communication, and earlier concepts unfortunately contribute to a romanticized view of leadership influence, and will often lead to disappointing outcomes for practitioners who uncritically and narrowly embrace narrow views of human communication.

Viewed more broadly, communication is a process through which individuals create and use information to relate to the environment and one another (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). As discussed throughout, this implies that communication outcomes and the meanings and interpretations involved are jointly created by senders and receivers, leaders and followers. This understanding of leadership aligns with and extends communication scholarship which presents leadership through a social constructionist lens, whereby leadership is understood to be the joint product of leader–follower interaction (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b).

This conceptualization of human communication leads to a view of leadership as the process of social influence that is constituted through both verbal and nonverbal communication. Meaning, context, and goal setting are interwoven into this leadership transaction. As stated, leadership and influence outcomes are planned and unplanned, intentional and accidental, formal and informal, serving goals that may be "good" or "evil."

A communication-oriented understanding of the leadership process helps reveal the complexity of that which might otherwise be understood as a simple, commonsensical, intuitive, and taken-for-granted accomplishment. Notably, a communicative approach highlights the informational and relational consequences of social influence— consequences that are defined by followers as much as by leaders and that are concerned with both sensemaking *and* sensegiving activities. The approach suggests that an excessive emphasis on leader-as-source-of-influence, along with the focus on influence as a consequence of planned and formal leadership activity, require some rethinking by leadership scholars as well as practitioners.

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