

Rational Leadership Theory: Exploring the Social Processes of Leadership and Organizing

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A new concept being explored in the leadership literature, whose meaning is still being developed, is relational leadership. This form of leadership has been primarily investigated through two different lenses: the *entity* perspective that focuses on the individual's traits and internal processes to examine how he or she engages with others; and a relational *process* perspective which focuses on the social interactions themselves and how this establishes a network of leaders and followers. Mary Uhl-Bien argues that these two views should not be separate but that they can be encompassed within a greater structure. She introduces a greater framework, Relational Leadership Theory, which embeds both perspectives into a more socially dynamic, less hierarchical, and collective approach to the generation and functioning of leadership.

In the first section, the author offers a thorough review of the literature on the entity (individual reality) perspective. The focus is on the individual and takes into account attributes and the internal workings of these individuals. The individual and his "possessions" (mind contents) are very distinct from the surrounding environment. This view also introduces the idea of the "subject—object" where one individual's traits and behaviors take precedence and the other individual is merely being influenced.

The author expands on the points described earlier, specifically between the leader and the member. Essentially, this form of leadership (in the most basic model) is built around two individuals and their "exchange sequences" or "interactions" between one and the other. These interactions are directly influenced by behaviors, attitudes, and expectations. The key thing to remember is that all of these assessments take place from the perspective of the individual and thus he or she becomes the subject, while whoever is influenced (whether it be another person or a group) becomes the object. Another issue which comes up in the entity mode of thought is the differing views of the self, namely the relational and collective perceptions of self. The relational self comes from the idea that one defines him or herself in respect to "significant others" while the collectivist self sees him or herself as part of an organization. These two views in turn influence the degree to which the leader and follower are inter-dependent roles.

Uhl-Bien next proceeds to explain exactly how the relational (multiple realities) perspective differs from the entity (individual reality) perspective, and what insight we have to gain from it. The first big issue is, of course, that the individual is not a separate entity from the environment. Another difference lies in the fact that instead of focusing on "intra" or "interpersonal" internal processes one has to deal with "local—cultural—

historical processes.” Leadership in this sense is shaped by a series of external factors and processes rather than the internal characteristics of the self. There is a more complex interplay with multiple meanings that produces social reality.

Finally, the author presents her vision of relational leadership theory (RLT) which encompasses the internal and external processes of both of these previous perspectives. “RLT is, at its core, a *process theory* of leadership.” Her view is that RLT is a method to explore relational dynamics, see relationships as an outcome, and use relational dynamics as a process of structuring and change. This theory is thus more flexible and at the same time more stable than the two previous theories. It would take into account all types of processes and more closely track the influence of all leadership as well as the organization as a whole. Thus, by seeing these entity and the relational perspectives as complimentary rather than opposing, we can foster the evolution of the relational leadership framework and see “how leadership arises through the interactions and negotiation of social order among organizational members.”