

Implications of Integral Theory for Contemporary Leadership

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by Steve Crowther

In the search for effective methods and theories for contemporary leadership, the social sciences have been mined and adapted for the development of emerging theories. However, there is yet to be a consensus concerning effective leadership. In her search for answers in leading organizations, Wheatley (1999) ponders why progress so often comes from unexpected places or as a result of surprises that our planning had not considered. The answer may be in the method of understanding the system of organization and leadership. In the western world, the linear way of doing research has produced great advances; yet, the way into the future may require nonlinear integrated systems of thinking such as integral theory. In this theory, there are four perspectives through which the world is experienced, and reality can be viewed yielding an effective theory (Wilber, 1997). In this connection, leadership may yield further nuances of reality for research and the development of more fully developed theories that could answer the question of unexpected results. In integral theory, new partnerships are developed, such as that of leadership theory and quantum physics which will serve as an example in developing nonlinear models for organizations and leadership. This article will demonstrate how to use integral theory in the development of leadership theory.

Integral Theory

Integral theory, as developed by Ken Wilber, proposes that knowledge is limited because researchers use only one of four potential quadrants in pursuing new knowledge. Integral theory offers four perspectives through which the world is experienced: subjective, intersubjective, objective and interobjective (Devos, 2008). An integral theory includes knowledge from all four of these perspectives. These four quadrants can also be separated into intentional, behavioral, cultural and social (Wilber, 1997). The four quadrants relate to different types of knowledge and different settings for understanding.

Experts in various fields are limited because they only use one of the four fields in their pursuit of understanding and endeavor to show the other quadrants as invalid forms of knowledge (Wilber, 1997). Single focus in an area of research helps to develop depth, but also causes the researcher to miss important points that can be seen through other disciplines.

The top quadrants have to do with individual knowledge; the bottom two with collective knowledge; the right hand quadrants with exterior knowledge; and the left with interior knowledge (Wilber, 1997). These relationships can be viewed graphically.

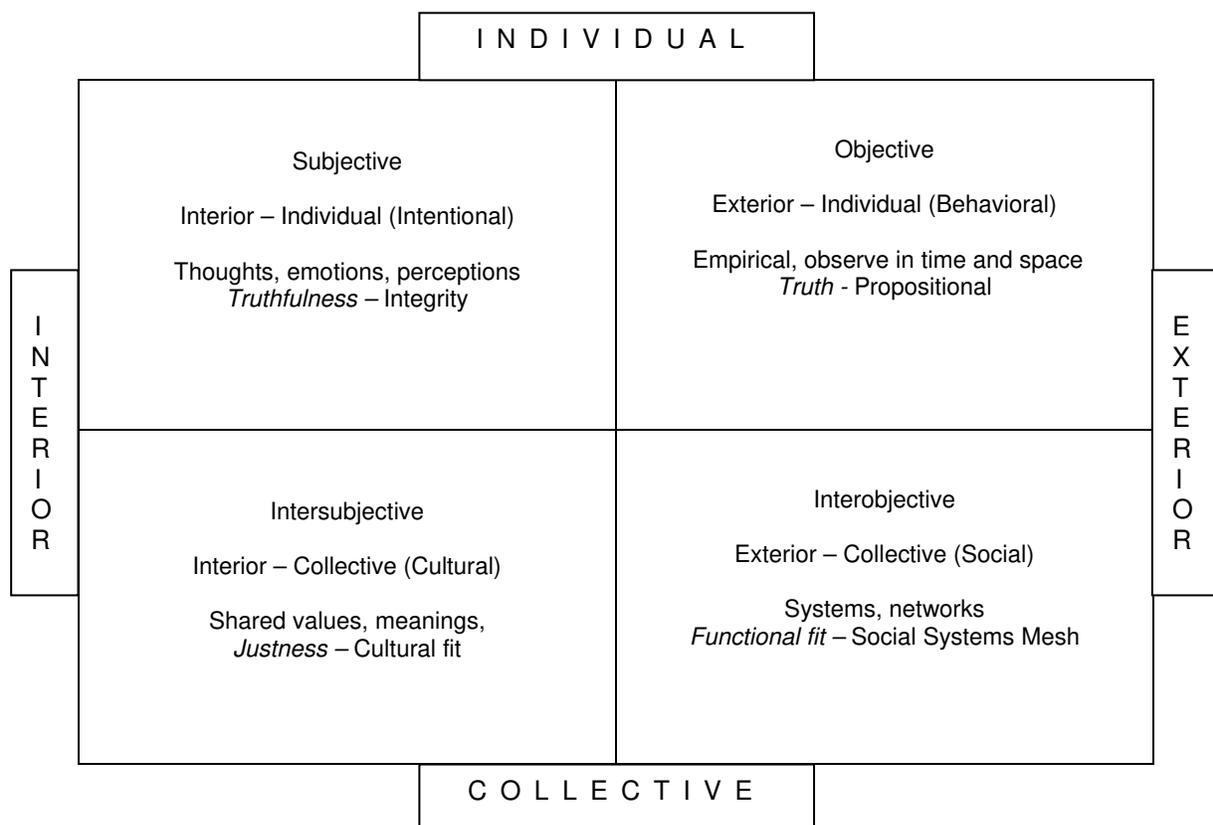


Figure 1. The four quadrants of integral theory

An Integral Theory of Leadership

The four major theories of business management cover the four quadrants of integral theory: Theory X focuses on individual behavior; Theory Y focuses on psychological understanding; cultural management focuses on organizational culture; and systems management emphasizes the social

system (Wilber, 2003-2004). In addition, this approach can be used by different disciplines developing a common language and an ability for these disciplines to learn from each other (Wilber, 2003-2004). Therefore, integral theory can be used to develop concepts for leadership that converge from different theories of leadership and from different disciplines altogether such as quantum physics. These quadrants exist whether they are acknowledged or not, and they influence each other, therefore, truth springs from them more effectively when they are allowed to interact in the research and discovery process. Leadership viewed through integral theory in connection to quantum physics reveals new broad strokes for consideration.

Upper Right Hand Quadrant

The upper right hand quadrant contains the perception of objective truth as found in the physical sciences. It is here that quantum physics with its objective truth impacts leadership and organizational theory. As the scientific evidence points to fluctuation and change as the essentials for producing order in the universe, it implies that disorder can be a source of order in organizations and a way of providing leadership in organizations (Wheatley, 1999). Worldview is affected by the sciences, and when the sciences begin to change, so does worldview and the relevant issues for leadership. There are new principles in quantum physics revealing the dynamics between chaos and creativity as well as between disruption and growth (Wheatley, 1999). These principles imply that disorder can be a source of order, and that leadership fixation on bringing order is misplaced. The way into the future for leadership and organization is not more order, but more innovation. While this is not a new idea, it could be that fixation on order has hindered much innovation and that the need is to find new disordered processes for higher levels of innovation, instead of trying to manage innovation.

Through integral theory, leadership is finding new ways to release rather than manage innovation. Radical nonlinear innovation is the only way to escape hypercompetition, and it requires leaders in an organization to escape from precedent and imagine novel solutions to move into the future (Hamel, 2002). Dis-equilibrium can be provoked by the pursuit of a new opportunity, a threat from the environment or fluctuations that alter the entire organization. This pushes the system far beyond its existing range of activity (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Leadership must then move beyond keeping order to provoking and embracing novel solutions and pushing the system beyond its present range to become instruments of disorder to bring advance. Embracing uncertainty and even creating disorder becomes the new default mode for leaders.

Lower Right Hand Quadrant

The lower right hand quadrant contains objective exteriors that can be seen, however, it is collective rather than individual. This is the perception of the interobjective world, the world as systems of people interacting. Organizational leadership research fits well into this quadrant of interobjective truth. Leadership asks the questions of how to influence others in the context of networks, the very places of research in this quadrant. Quantum physics speaks to this area as well. Quantum imagery challenges many basic assumptions, including understanding of relationships, in that everything is interconnected and things change properties and form as they respond to one another (Wheatley, 1999). Power is developed by these relationships, where the relationships become the important issues. If power is generated by relationships, then leadership needs to attend to these relationships (Wheatley, 1999). Leadership, then, is about developing proper relationships with others including followers and those outside of the normal sphere of a leader.

Leadership in this area is to develop high quality relationships. Rich and meaningful interactions, also called “nonlinear interactions,” lead to unexpected and mutually supportive outcomes, which strengthen interpersonal networks and help to amplify changes that emerge (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Leadership viewed from this quadrant must bring people together to foster interpersonal exchange and build the community capital between people both inside and outside of the organization.

Upper Left Hand Quadrant

The upper left hand quadrant is the area of perception relating to subjective truth or internal perceptions dealing with aspects of integrity. This is the world of the interior experiences of thoughts and emotions (Devos, 2008). Here the subjective issues of integrity become paramount in understanding leadership, but this is also the place for the search for self. Leadership is not only what one does, but first, is an issue of who one is, and this ontology of leadership is a framework to investigate the hidden dynamics of leaders manifest in leadership behavior (Ayers, 2006). A person is more than the sum of the parts of the person, and ontology develops knowledge in this area.

Quantum physics impacts the area of self though it is a physical science. Quantum physics encounters the essence of humanity, which is consciousness, in telling us that observing an object to be someplace causes it to be there (Rosenblum & Kuttner, 2006). The conscious observation of the physical universe affects occurrences in the universe; consciousness is connected to physics. In

quantum physics, matter develops a relationship with the observer and changes to meet the expectations of the observer (Wheatley, 1999). Organizational intent and identity become important here, and there is a need for fewer descriptions of tasks being replaced by learning how to facilitate process (Wheatley, 1999). Leadership develops the consciousness of the organization in developing these issues of intent and identity while developing a willingness to enter a journey of organizational self discovery.

Leadership viewed from this quadrant is to develop the consciousness of the organization through process rather than tasks. Leading comes from who one is, and is not primarily what one does. These ontological aspects of leaders affect their behavior (Ayers, 2006). Leaders need to be developed individually in the areas of self, including areas of character integrity, then need to take the organization on a journey of self discovery finding the foundations of the “who” and “what” of the organization. This process is facilitated by broad connection with and discussion of such foundational issues of character, integrity and unique giftedness as individuals and as an organization. In other words, discover how the individuals in the organization can identify and use their unique gifts to engage or partner with the organization.

Lower Left Hand Quadrant

The lower left hand quadrant provides an interior look at the group in which one lives or does research. This is the intersubjective area, the world of collective interior experiences in values and culture (Devos, 2008). The study of leadership in this area would yield good practice in moving across cultures and would also provide knowledge for pushing toward the core of leadership. Leadership is culturally contingent, and it is important to understand how culture impacts both leadership and organizations (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

In quantum physics, fields in which particles exist are considered real though they are non-material (Wheatley, 1999). The fields are the culture which influences behavior. In organizations, there are cultures that affect the behavior of people, and these cultures are created by invisible issues like values. As leaders, it is important to consider non-material forces in organizations such as culture, values and ethics (Wheatley, 1999). Leadership is about developing a culture involving values and ethics in the organization. Ideas become the real forces in leading organizations; they are not soft adjuncts, but become the substance of leadership.

In this quadrant, leadership develops a proper culture of vision and values. The leader must become knowledgeable of the culture of the organization to be able to communicate its truths to others and to be an agent of change for the culture. An organizational culture includes values, dominant leadership styles, language, symbols, definitions of success and expectations (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). To lead effectively, one must not only know the culture, but be able to influence the culture through an impartation of values and vision. Values give the organization foundations upon which to build and vision shapes the future for the organization to inhabit.

Conclusion

The convergence of quantum physics and organizational leadership provide a way to develop an integral theory of leadership with relevant data from each quadrant.

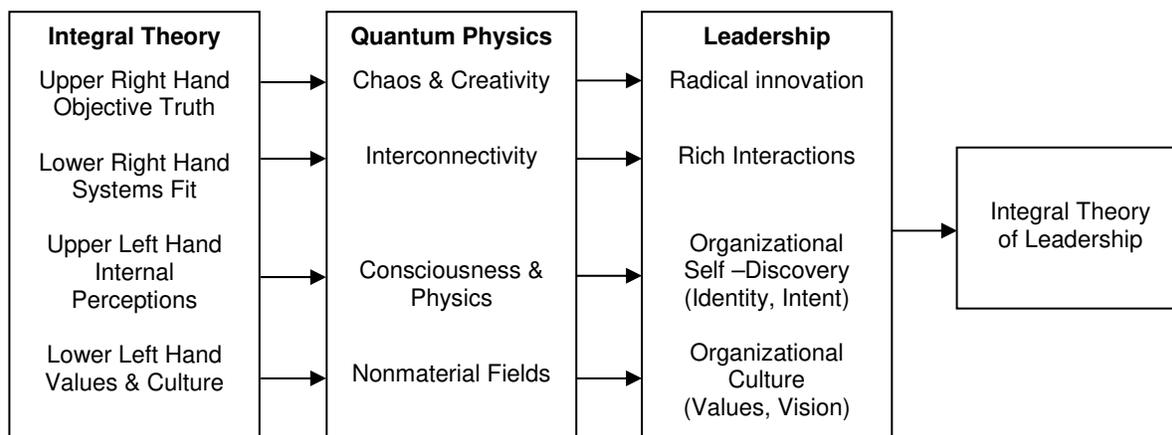


Figure 2. Developing an integral theory of leadership

Integral theory provides a nonlinear approach to these issues providing new data that may bring answers to these and other questions as briefly demonstrated in this study. Leadership research, though relatively young, needs new depth and a broader reach to answer the real questions. The pathway into the future must include convergence with other research, and integral theory provides a new path that may yet yield new theories for leadership that are not only cogent and related to reality, but are effective and will help answer the hard questions about leadership.

About the Author

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