Critique of Classical Concepts of Leadership

The growing pressure for change in the wake of volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous working environments (VUCA), along with the constant need for innovation, has prompted professional organizations to restructure work: away from an individual employee focus and onto a team perspective (Lawler & Worley, 2006). Companies do this in prospect of quicker reaction times, more adaptability and more flexible answers to the unexpected (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). As a consequence of this increased professional reorganization into teams, the development of methods and theories to measure the effectiveness of teamwork has increasingly become, a studied topic of research (Goodwin, Burke, Wildman, & Salas, 2009).

Surprisingly, while examining previously conducted empirical research on this topic, one notes that the literature is primarily based upon the classical understanding of managerial leadership (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas & Halpin, 2006). The same is true for the currently existing concepts of leadership (Lang, Rybnikova, & Wald, 2014). This formulation is problematic insofar as this classical approach involves an individual-centered concept of leadership, for which it is assumed that managers and superiors influence the attitudes, motivation, effort and performance of individual team members owing to certain characteristics ("a great man") or behavior (transactional or transformational leadership), and in doing so regulate team output (Pawlowsky, Schmid, & Harsch, 2014).

Ultimately, leadership in this view is reduced to the dyadic relationship between managers and employees and therefore fails to distinguish itself from the relationship between superiors and the team as a whole (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010) or to highlight the effects of the structuring of a dyadic interaction on the entire team as a subject of discussion (Witte, 2007). Classical leadership theories have therefore been criticized for being inappropriate to properly capture the dynamic and complexity of teams (Salas, Stagl, & Burke, 2004).

To recognize this point of criticism, it is necessary to take a conceptual change in perspective while examining leadership. Rather than an individual or dyadic perspective, a microsystem perspective is to be adopted, in which leadership is repositioned to the team-level (Yukl, 2010). It primarily draws from a superordinate microsystem, which is comprised of the work group, including superiors (Graf & Witte, 2012)[1]. The theoretical switch to modern systems theory (Willke, 2005) facilitates the appropriate change in perspective and simultaneously allows for *team leadership* to be relocated into a larger context, in which leadership is construed as the steering of a microsystem (the team or department), which operates within a mesosystem (the firm)[2].

Drawing upon a social systems theory based on sociological systems theory (Luhmann, 1984; Willke, 2005) and social psychology (Witte, 1994), a practice-oriented model of managerial leadership is to be developed as part of the research project "Teamlead", which places focus on leadership as the steering of a microsystem. The basis for this research represents the assumption that social systems, independent of their type and size, exhibit universal characteristics that influence their quality. These

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[1] Here, when leadership is discussed, we refer to internal, formal leadership (see also Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010).

[2] In reference to Witte (1994), there are several overlapping levels to be distinguished from one another. The lowest level consists of the individual, placed on the individual level. The subsequent levels are the microsystem (the team or small group) and the mesosystem (the company). The next level consists of the macrosystems (e.g. the educational system – that is, abstract functional units within a society). Furthermore, to be distinguished from these macrosystems are larger macrolevels (the Federal Republic of Germany) and supranational levels (the EU).

characteristics are then transferred into a leadership context and therefore in the synergistic leadership model. Thus, the steering of a microsystem takes place via the support and controlling of six essential system functions. Existing knowledge in the fields of group and leadership research, as well as expert experiences, will be considered and thereby integrated into this model. Another advantage of this approach is that it results in a model which clearly specifies the tasks of leading of teams, rather than a model of competencies on a more abstract level[3].

Synergistic Concept of Leadership – Leading Microsystems

One of the most important objectives in **differences management** is that superiors are able to ensure that the borders to nearby systems are clear and that the team strives toward a common goal. Only if borders with other departments and teams and also wi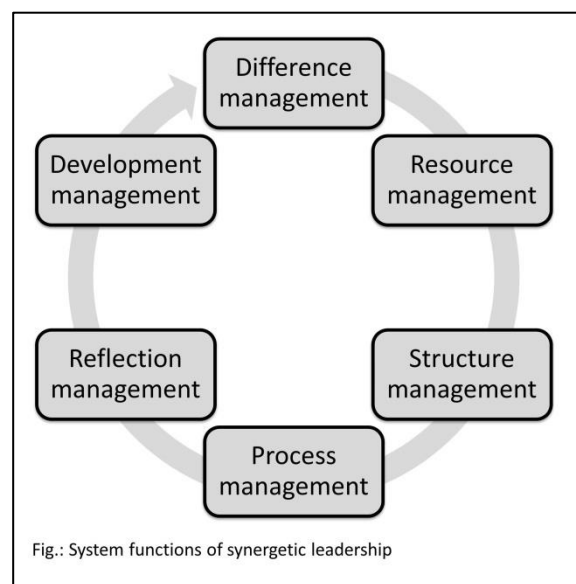th environments outside the organization are clearly defined a unity perceived by the team members can constitute, which is a prerequisite for a felt affiliation and identification. Taking into account both characteristics the drawing of frontiers and the clear objectives are so closely linked that they form a functional unit and have to be addressed collectively. Studies have shown, for example, that the establishment and pursuit of common goals represents an essential foundation for the development of a common identity and strengthens the cohesion among team members (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004). Further studies have proven the existence of a positive correlation between team cohesion and team effectiveness in top management teams (Smith, Smith, Olian, Sims, O'Bannon, & Scully, 1994; Hambrick, 1995). Furthermore, teams

Fig.: System functions of synergetic leadership

perform more creatively when their members share a common vision[4] (Lynn & Akgün, 2001; Pearce & Ensley, 2004).

The putting together of a team, as well as the attainment of resources and their allocation within the team, belongs to the most important objectives of **resource management**. Previous research suggests that team composition heavily influences team processes and team performance. Studies have increasingly pointed out that the degree of heterogeneity and varied combinations of team members have a significant influence on the way teams function (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Hülsheger, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009; Humphrey, Morgeson, & Mannor, 2009). Moreover, it has been theoretically established that heterogeneity in the grouping together of a team is an essential prerequisite for creativity (Amabile, 1988). As has been argued in the literature time and again, besides personal resources, informational, financial and material resources represent crucial determinants of team effectiveness (Hackman & Walton, 1986).

While for **structure management** it is especially important that there is a distinct allocation of roles and responsibilities within the team and that all work packages are clearly defined, **process management** is more concerned with those leadership tasks which serve to establish timing and

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[3] For an overview of the variety of scientific studies on the concepts of competencies, see Tett et al. (2000)'s study.

[4] This vision refers to the extent to which team members perceive the superordinate goals to be motivating, understandable and attainable (Maier, Streicher, Jonas, & Frey, 2007).

standard procedures, while also encouraging flexibility. Studies on this topic have shown that teams whose managers clearly structure and plan members' responsibilities and workflow tend to work more effectively (Kane, Zaccaro, Tremble, & Masuda, 2002), while a high degree of participation and autonomy fosters team creativity and innovativeness (Axtell, Holman, Unsworth, Wall, & Waterson, 2000). Studies on job satisfaction have shown, furthermore, that employees tend to be more satisfied when they have the possibility to actively take part in the structuring of their working environment and thus take over responsibility for their work (Rose & Wright, 2005; Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000).

Reflection management is primarily concerned with the tasks that see to the analysis and evaluation of performance-based data. A major assumption is that monitoring and feedback are important factors for adaptive and innovative team performance (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas & Halpin, 2006). This correlation has already been empirically proven by the means of a meta-analysis, among other studies (Hülsheger, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009).

For **development management**, the outsourcing of responsibilities and the requesting of assistance from the next level up when the attainment of performance goals is in danger are especially important. Studies have shown on the organizational level that executive support has a positive effect on team innovativeness (Axtell, Holman, Unsworth, Wall, & Waterson, 2000).

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Research Project "Teamlead"

The research project "Teamlead" is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and conducted by the University of Applied Management. The project is segmented into four phases.

In the **first phase** of the research, a qualitative survey of executive staff, interim managers and employees was conducted. The pursued and desired action strategies during particularly successful, as well as of unsuccessful, team projects ("critical incidents technique") were collected. Additionally, we asked participants to indicate with predefined examples what the executive staff at their firm should do in certain situations, in their view. 661 action strategies were thereby collected, which were then categorized according to fixed coding rules via various evaluators. During these categorizations the action strategies mentioned were firstly assigned to system functions before being then summarized inductively into tasks (main categories) (Mayring, 2010). The aim of this step was to specify the synergetic leadership concept and the system functions, still relatively abstract, more precisely.

A Delphi study was additionally conducted during the first survey, for which participants were presented various future scenarios based on our leadership model. These scenarios were then rated based on their efficiency and desirability, and also a forecast of scenarios´ distribution rate in german enterprises was asked.

The results of our **Delphi study** create a relatively homogeneous image: the presented future scenarios were all rated extremely desirable and also efficient. However, the results of our study also show that the respondents believe that the presented future scenarios will probably not be implemented at the majority of enterprises within the next 10 years.

In the **second phase** of the research, a Germany-wide online survey of executive personnel, with N>500, will be carried out to define the synergetic leadership model more precisely. The leadership tasks collected inductively from the results of the first study, the theoretical framework, and previous background studies are to be statistically verified, to test the extent to which the deductively compiled summarization of action strategies corresponds to the assignment of leadership tasks to the system functions.

In the **third phase**, an experiment with a between-subjects design will examine whether or not teams which are led according to the synergetic model perform better than conventional teams. An additional validation of the model will take place in the **fourth phase**, which marks the conclusion of the project: A field study will be conducted to observe the degree to which the results collected thus far are put into practice. Here, the correlation between synergetic leadership and efficiency of team performance will be further examined.

More information on the project is available here http://teamleadership.de.

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Organization

Information about the university: The University of Applied Management (HAM), with almost 3.000 students, is the largest Bavarian private, state-approved higher education institution accredited by the German Council of Science and Humanities, with focus areas in business administration, business psychology and sport management. The university's intern Center for Innovation & Quality in Leadership & Learning (CILL), led by Prof. Dr. Nele Graf, carries out research on trends in corporate learning and leadership.

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