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# Taking leadership research global



**While there is much talk about the global dimension of leadership, the reality is that research in this area has lagged behind because, even globally, it is based on US-centric models, be it US companies or American leaders.**



This is because the US is where most academic developments have taken place in this field over the last couple of decades. “But the world has moved on and we need to ensure a much more representative description and understanding of leadership,” says **Cristina Escallon**, director of the INSEAD Leadership Initiative, speaking on the sidelines of the first INSEAD-Wharton Research Conference on Leadership.

Escallon says that INSEAD seems particularly well placed to contribute significantly to bringing more diverse perspectives to leadership research.

The objective of the conference was to promote rigorous and relevant research on leadership- broadly defined as influencing people to contribute willingly to the good of the collective, as well as coordinating and guiding the collective to achieve its goals- and to develop a sense of community among leading scholars coming from several intellectual disciplines. Some 35 scholars, diverse in their specific leadership interests, nationalities and research styles, took part in small, highly interactive discussions.

Perception and performance



Leadership research is always diverse because it deals with the individual, the team and organisational-level processes, says **Robert Lord**, Professor of Psychology from the University of Akron. We know a lot about how leaders are perceived, and how being perceived as a leader leads to greater influence. Such issues are particularly important in politics and government, and when leaders deal with individuals outside their organisations. However, there are no comparable developed theories that explain how leaders affect organisational performance. Lord feels there is a need for better theory there and a broader conceptualisation of how the process operates.

### **Neural knowledge**

Lord presented alternative views on knowledge and showed how they are consistent with different types of leadership research. “When most people think of knowledge, they think of conscious, explicit knowledge of the type that is represented by symbols such as words or sentences,” he says. “However, research in cognitive science, and particularly artificial intelligence, has shown that the human brain (and artificial agents) can

represent knowledge in other ways.”

One important way is in terms of networks of units that are analogous to the neurons in the brain. “Such networks are important because many types of social processes may be guided by implicit, unconscious processes that are nicely represented by such models of knowledge,” he says.

Therefore, a leader's self-sacrificing behaviour may inspire a more cooperative, collective orientation in followers through automatic priming effects operating through such neural networks. “It’s not just what a leader says that is important, but also what she or he looks like, how their voice sounds, how they stand, how expressive they are, etc.” These factors can be automatically combined in neural networks to produce composite reactions.



**Katherine Klein**, Professor of Management at Wharton, researched the moderating role of team leadership in situations when team members’ values differ. The effects of diversity among team members - specifically,

diversity in team members' work-related values - on team outcomes such as conflict among team members and team effectiveness, depend on the nature of the team leader's approach. "When team members' values differ a lot, it's helpful for the team to have a task-focused leader, who structures the work, provides deadlines, and clarifies work roles," she argues.

## **Transformational leadership**

Klein says that all the key topics discussed at the conference are likely to be topics of future research: team leadership; leaders' positions in, and effects on, their work units' social networks; leader identity and ethics; and leadership at the top. "Interest in charismatic or transformational leadership has peaked, and scepticism about the 'leader as visionary hero' has grown."

Building on Klein's observations, Escallon says many organisations nowadays embody a 'distributed leadership' model. This is where concepts and tools such as 'fair process' and collective emotional intelligence potentially have a major role to play.

*The first INSEAD-Wharton Research Conference was held at INSEAD's Europe campus in Fontainebleau on 19-21 June 2008.*

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