

# The Art of Self-Leadership during times of unprecedented global change

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Self-leadership has become as important as leading others, and subsequently, it has added an interesting dimension to the study of leadership. Scholars and practitioners alike have studied self-mastery, especially those concerned with human behavior and leadership. There is evidence that the ability to lead oneself ought to take precedence over leading others. It is against that background that this study, therefore, examines the art of self-leadership during times of unprecedented global change, where uncertainty abounds. Leadership theories posit that several factors and circumstances influence great leaders. Accordingly, both the conceptual and theoretical frameworks argue that the most critical tool in the exercise of leadership is the leader. Interestingly, empirical evidence reveals that leaders have enormous power to shape and redirect the course of history, and that begins with their ability to lead themselves first, then others.

**Methods:** The study has employed a qualitative and exploratory approach using non-intrusive case studies. The data has been analyzed through an interpretivist lens. In addition, the paper applied phenomenology to get a better understanding of Self-leadership as a construct. Pursuantly, the paper interpreted experiences and meaning of the phenomenon. Lastly, the study also employed thematic analysis.

**Findings and Conclusion:** The study, therefore, seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of the concept of self-leadership and as a developing framework. In addition, we found that self-leadership could be an effective complimentary framework to the other well-developed leadership theories. Thus, its findings could provide relevant insights into the art of self-leadership and may inspire future research. The results could equip leaders and individuals to better use the power within to transform themselves and societies.

**Key words:** Self-leadership, Leadership, Human Behavior, global Change

## 1.1 Introduction

Leadership is one of the most studied phenomena, with contentious debates on its diverse schools of thought (Azad et al., 2017). Evidently, the unprecedented global events challenge the debates on whether or not leaders need innate motivation and self-influence to face these times. Arguably, self-leadership has emerged as one of the concepts and leadership school of thought that can add value to this discourse, complementing other prominent leadership theories, including Trait leadership Theory, Transformational leadership Theory, Transactional leadership Theory, Ambidextrous leadership Theory, to list a few (Azad, et al., 2017). Furthermore, a scholarly survey of the literature suggests that self-leadership is still a growing field within the broader leadership frameworks, one that is still searching for a formalized theory. In tandem with this view, there has been considerable interest in self-leadership, especially during the recent global Covid 19 pandemic, global economic crises, and political instabilities in various regions that tend to bring heightened emotions and anxieties (Sjöblom, et al., 2022). The dominant question has been whether self-leadership can influence positively during these challenging times.

Accordingly, a scholarly survey of the literature seems to suggest that some ambiguity and variation exist in the definition of leadership (Kjellstrom, et al., 2020). Some scholars argue it is a born trait, and others contend that it is an acquired skill and others posit that everyone is inherently a leader. The emphasis is on traits and characteristics (Za, et al., 2016; Harrison, 2018; Sivaruban, 2021) and brings to the fore the notion of positional leadership and the importance of the individual leader versus everyone being a leader, even without a position. Generally, leadership is defined as motivating and influencing others towards a specific goal in an organization (Reed, et al., 2019). From this definition, it is safe to deduce that self-leadership, therefore, is part of the broader leadership. Specifically, self-leadership is defined as a process of self-influence through which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform (Sjöblom, et al., 2022). Although studies on self-leadership have existed since the 1980s, just like the understanding of leadership, in general, its definition varies, and thus, ambiguity in its application remains (Sjöblom, et al., 2022).

In theory, while the above matters, in practice, there is a sense that the problem of a lack of self-leadership has taken prominence on the global stage and, by extension to global challenges such as increased poverty, inequality and climate change crisis. Thus, this paper conceptualizes the art of self-leadership during unprecedented global uncertainties. The key to this question is that the absence of self-leadership can be disastrous during challenging times. This paper takes a multi-disciplinary approach with insights from leadership frameworks intersecting with behavioral studies and cognitive studies emanating from the construct of 'self'. The sections below will discuss in-depth these various approaches in the context of the proposition of the art of self-leadership during unprecedented global challenges as proposed by this paper. First, we briefly examine the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning this paper, followed by methods, findings and discussion.

## **2.1 Frameworks underpinning this paper**

### **Leadership Theories**

Early and prominent leadership theorists like Stogdill (1948) defined leadership as 'an influencing process aimed at goal achievement. The epistemic justifications of this definition hinge upon the inherent traits that are attractive in leaders and thus influence a goal. These justifications help test our proposition, as traits can contribute to effective self-leadership. Yet, the ambiguity and consensus on the definition of leadership remain a contentious and unsettled scholarly issue. To this end, the authors found a benefit from each of these leadership definitions when used appropriately in different contexts. Accordingly, the next section will briefly examine some leadership theories and, invariably, create a link between them and the essence of our research statement.

#### **Situational leadership Theory/ Contingency theory**

To the extent that this paper proposes the art of self-leadership during unprecedented times, it is prudent to examine the situational leadership theory briefly (Sivaruban, 2021), made more prominent in the 1960s, as it espouses leadership in a specific situation, which may reasonably extend

to challenging times. Arguably, situational leadership can provide a valuable lens when juxtaposed with self-leadership during unprecedented times. Inherent in this proposition is a change of scenario or circumstances. Studies show that the Contingency Theory originated in North America and emerged because of the criticisms of the Great Man Theory, Trait Theory and Behavioural Theory (Sivaruban, 2021). Further, the proponents of the Contingency Theory believe that leadership depends on many variables, including followers and the situation in which the leader must provide effective leadership.

Whereas, Fiedler (1974) was one of the greatest proponents of Situational Theory (Sivaruban, 2021). Situational theorists believe that leaders depend on situations they find themselves in, and as such, no one-leadership style can fit all situations. This theory was founded in 1969. Its proponents believe there is no specific way to lead because leaders depend largely on situations, which may vary and call for different ways of leading (Cherry, 2018). Since leadership as a phenomenon is difficult to measure, studies show that the main criticism of Fiedler's Contingency Theory is its unreliability. Because Contingency Theory originates from North America, some studies argue it may not work well in other cultures and contexts (Sivaruban, 2021).

From the foregoing, a critical analysis of the literature suggests that the Situational and Contingency Theories are similar. Some scholars differentiate between the two, while other scholars combine them (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Sivaruban, 2021). In this study, given their strong similarities, the two theories have been combined.

Another developing theory that has found some strong association with self-leadership is ambidextrous leadership. Ambidextrous leadership means the ability to do two things at once, in this case, traversing challenges while remaining steadfast on the goal of being the best version of oneself will be the issue of focus and association to self-leadership. While transformation means the ability to inspire change in society, there can never be a doubt that people's experiences can transform them internally in profound ways.

Thus, arguably crucible moments can be one's greatest gift. These moments elicit a new sense of purpose or identity in some cases. A crucible moment, by definition, is a transformative experience when one's character is tested. It directly challenges a person to quest for deeper connections with and actualization of their innate power from within, irrespective of any given external reality or influence. Beyond all, this connection is what defines and makes the person to be who and what they are, in own and existential terms.

Caution about these arguments, however, is that they assume that every person has notable power and greatness in them, and all individuals have interest and ability to connect with this power from within and explore it to its fullness.

#### **Behavioural Theory/ Style Theory (1940–the 1950s)**

This theory is an evolution from the Trait Theory, and its proponents argue that leaders can be identified and made through certain behaviours (Sivaruban, 2021; Khan et al., 2016). Thus, leaders can be taught new skills to help them to become effective. This theory focuses mainly on the behaviour of the leader and less on the situation and traits (Benmira & Agboola, 2021).

One of the greatest advantages of this theory is that it contains an element of coaching development that can assist a leader to become more effective. The behavioural approach is not without criticism, however, with some arguing it is time consuming and only successful if leaders are willing to put themselves on the line. The other criticism is that this theory only looks at the leader's behaviour but fails to look at situational factors like what kind of environment (Harrison, 2018).

#### **Self-leadership**

Self-Leadership studies and leadership theories, in general, argue that leadership is influenced by characteristic and contextual factors interrelated at the individual, societal levels, national and global levels. Thus, there is

also a growing contestation of ideas by many scholars advocating that Leadership should be understood and interpreted within the context in which it is expressed (Adewale, 2020; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). It is against this backdrop that self-leadership has taken prominence in the current leadership discourse. Whereas Neck and Houghton proposed that self-leadership has earned the respect of many scholars as a growing discipline, as reflected by a myriad of theoretical and empirical self-leadership journal publications, so did businesses as they embrace this concept as of value to the workforce production (Neck & Houghton, 2006).

Neck and Houghton (2006) further conjectured that self-leadership entails specific behavioral and cognitive strategies designed to influence personal effectiveness positively. At the center of this phenomenon is the whole construct of 'self', 'self-ness' or 'individual beingness from within', thus intersecting with one's innate motivation, one's behavior, ability to influence oneself, emotional intelligence and cognitive abilities to internally strategize to achieve one's goal. These can further extend to self-awareness, self-observation and self-critique behavioral strategies (Neck & Houghton, 2006). The focus here is on the personal search and quest for individuals to connect with their natural source of identity, power and actualization, which cannot be permanently questioned or successfully denied by any reality from outside the person. The driving principle here is that people are the products of their own thinking, and, logically, therefore, no one can destroy a person without their own permission, approval or cooperation.

Concurring with the above views, some scholars argue that these self-cognitive and constructive thought patterns can be helpful tools and habits that can positively affect performance and effective self-leadership (Manz & Neck, 2004). It is essential to note that some scholars argue that self-leadership cannot be applied at all times, as contended by prominent scholars like Manz and Sims. They assert, "it is naive to assume that relying on self-leadership is always appropriate [...] several important situational factors influence the appropriateness of attempts to develop self-leadership in followers" (Manz & Sims, 2001). Some argue it is a normative concept, making it challenging to develop it entirely as a theory. These above

definitions and scholarly debates help answer the proposition made in the research statement, which is The Art of Self-Leadership during times of unprecedented global change.

The analysis of extant literature in the preceding section shows the epistemological foundations of these various leadership theories from some scholarly assertions. From these, we deduce varied definitions and ambiguity in postulations. However, the importance of traits, influence, self-motivation and behaviour are emerging. To this end, it is safe to deduce from the above that it begins with the leader and the ability to lead oneself before one can extend their leadership to others, especially during challenging times. It is our submission, therefore, that the ability to lead self well, regardless of situations or conditions, is a strong indicator of solid leadership quality. A leader who cannot lead well themselves have less or no chances to lead anyone well. Underlined here is the fact that no person can give what they do not have, thus, elucidating the importance of the construct of 'self' in the discharging of the act of leadership.

### **3.1 Hypothesis**

We propose a connection between self-leadership and navigating crises or uncertainty from the research statement. Thus, we develop the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1: Self-leadership has a positive effect during unprecedented times**

**Hypothesis 2: Self-leadership benefits from self-influence and self-motivation**

As scholars have postulated, the art of self-leadership can direct how one deals with a crisis and navigate it well. In this regard, we expect self-mastery and discipline to shape self-leadership as these are fundamental tools in leading oneself. Arguably, a complementary relationship, therefore, exists between self-leadership and better crisis management has been proposed.

## **4.1 Methods**

The study has employed a qualitative and exploratory approach, using non-intrusive case studies. The data has been analyzed through an interpretivist lens, applying phenomenology to get a better understanding of Self-leadership as a construct. In addition, the study also employed thematic analysis. The study relied heavily on a systematic literature review using a qualitative evidence synthesis (QES), which integrates and compares findings from primary qualitative studies (Grant & Booth, 2009). Central to its methodology is searching and generating themes and constructs to formulate a proposition.

The QES focused on publications between 2015 and 2022 (Grant & Booth, 2009). For this study, several articles on leadership theory and self-leadership during unprecedented global change were searched through Google Scholar, Web of Science, Open Science Framework (OSF) and Crossreff. After a critical appraisal of the literature, the authors concluded on twenty (20) articles that met the criteria for quality assurance in the study.

## 5.1 Findings/Results

Critical analysis and close examination of literature culminated in thematic expressions identified using visualizations created with word clouds (Wordclouds, 2021). Figure 1 below depicts visualizations of raw data from article summarizations through inductive coding (Saldana, 2015).



**Figure 1: Inductive Codes. Source: World clouds**

Figure 1 reflects the frequency of words within studies that reflect an intrinsic and extrinsic desire for self-leadership in challenging times. This cannot be realized until a nexus between leadership theoretical perspectives and self-leadership is interpreted out of their current dispositions. Ideally, it is our submission that self-leadership ought to be central in all leadership frameworks as it puts at the center the role of the leader and the ability to lead oneself before leading others.

The findings show that Self-leadership has become topical during turbulent times, especially during the global Covid 19 pandemic from 2020, which upended people's lives in unprecedented ways. This also extends to other global crises, which affect people's lives. The findings revealed an increased need for self-leadership during these times to ensure survival and personal effectiveness. In addition, self-motivation and self-influencing have been found to be critical in the exercise of self-leadership. Furthermore, the findings imply that the absence of self-leadership can be detrimental to the leader, as leaders must lead themselves first before leading others.

This study contributes to the current knowledge of self-leadership. First, even though self-leadership is topical, it is however, still developmental. Thus, for the theoretical development, the study provides evidence-based research that can inform its association with other established leadership frameworks. Furthermore, the contribution is that insights from the study could help individuals in the exercise of their leadership. The study strived to examine the art of self-leadership during unprecedented global times. Therefore, it is limited in that regard, as it did not look at several leadership theories but is limited to those directly associated with self-leadership. Another limitation of the study was that it was a systematic review, but no in-depth interviews of leaders or individuals of interest. Therefore, future studies could pursue primary research on this area of study to gain further insights.

## **6.1 Discussion and conclusion**

This paper makes a case that there is a relation between accentuated need for self-leadership and turbulent global times. Although leadership in general and self-leadership share some common themes, however, the leadership theory has not had full benefits of this association. Consequently, while leadership in organizations and personal traits of leaders have made the role of a leader explicit, however, the role of individual agency and how impactful self-leadership is during challenging times

remains partially understood and underexplored. Both conceptual and theoretical frameworks argue that the most critical tool in the exercise of leadership is the leader (Manz & Sims, 2001). Interestingly, empirical evidence reveals that leaders have enormous power to shape and redirect the course of history, and that begins with their ability to lead themselves first, then others (Manz & Neck, 2004).

Conceptually, self- leadership is hinged upon developmental theories and empirical case studies that cut across a diverse disciplinary approach from leadership, behavioural, ethical and socio-cultural theories (Sjöblom, et al., 2022). This is important as it relates to the art of self-leadership and suggests the importance of that innate ability that a leader must activate to lead oneself.

As we hypothesized that self-leadership has a positive effect during unprecedented times, the concept of self becomes central. The construct of self is critical in the realization of self-leadership as all begins with the 'self'. Thus, the researchers contend that behavior- focused self-leadership strategies are designed to encourage positive, desirable behaviors that lead to successful outcomes, while suppressing negative, undesirable behaviors that lead to unsuccessful outcomes (Neck & Houghton, 2006). In addition, the importance of traits seems to influence this very construct of self. Thus, scholars have been contending that the epistemic justifications of leadership theory hinge upon the inherent traits that are attractive in leaders and those draw followers to the leader. (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). However, some disagreements are observed among scholars in the value and place of trait theory as some argue that inherent in it is the subjective manner in which traits are measured, causing some scholars (Harrison, 2018) to declare this theory unscientific. This then brings to the fore the whole debate of whether or not traits contribute to effective self-leadership or are just complementary needs. We found that traits play a critical role in self-leadership.

Our second hypothesis was that Self-leadership benefits from self-influence and self-motivation. The basic assumption has been that individuals or human beings have control over themselves and their environments.

However, studies are showing different results that it takes self-leadership to influence and motivate oneself. Self-leadership has found its meaningful expression from concepts such as intrinsic motivation, awareness and self-influencing. Thus, scholars of Cognitive Theories have been contending that the need for competence and the need for self-determination are the primary mechanisms that drive intrinsic motivation (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Central to this theory is that individuals will seek to find and overcome challenges in an effort to increase feelings of competence and self-determination. Thus, this is beneficial to one's ability to achieve the art of self-leadership.

In conclusion, the study demonstrated the importance of self-leadership during challenging global times, as we have become part of a worldwide village. Overall, self-leadership is an innate exercise but can affect one and others in extrinsic ways. To have potential to lead others well, one must have ability and interest to lead one 'self well. Fact is, no leader can give or share what they do not have in, of and for themselves. Effective leadership starts and ends with self-leadership, defined in and through self and relative terms.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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