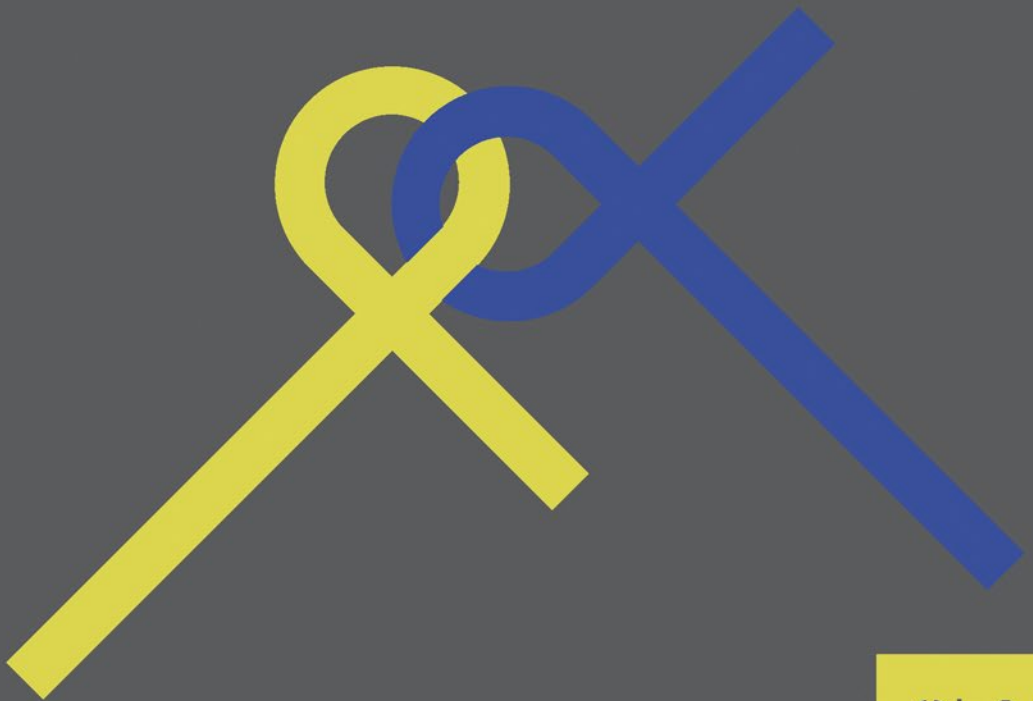


UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

PAUL 'T HART &
LARS TUMMERS



SECOND EDITION

THE PUBLIC
MANAGEMENT
& LEADERSHIP
SERIES

‘The authors have written an excellent and concise overview of the public leadership field that is useful for both scholars and practitioners. The book is filled with valuable summaries and insights.’

—John Bryson, *University of Minnesota, USA*

‘This gem is essential reading for all who teach or research leadership and indeed for leaders in any field seeking an insight into their role. It is strong on dispelling popular myths, but provides very useable alternative frameworks.’

—Allan Fels, *Australia and New Zealand School of Government*

‘Paul ’t Hart, now with Lars Tummers for the second edition, has pulled off another *tour de force*. The synthesis and exploration of public leaders and leadership from several angles is thought-provoking, insightful and engaging. This book extends, through its scholarship, the field of public leadership as a distinct field. It should be read by students, academics and practitioners alike. This area of academic work has never been more needed as the world faces a series of political, economic, social, technological and environmental challenges. Leadership responses to these challenges range from the illiberal to the democratic so this book is particularly valuable and timely.’

—Jean Hartley, *Open University, UK*

‘Paul ’t Hart and Lars Tummers’ sophisticated view of public leadership emphasizes the relevance of leaders, relationships, institutional arrangements, contexts and contingencies. Using captivating practical stories as examples, the book unravels how these factors work together to understand both what produces good leadership and what impact leadership has in public life. The authors successfully achieve their goal of conveying “what we know of (political, administrative and civic) leadership” in the very unique and messy world of public and collective problem-solving.’

—Sonia M. Ospina, *New York University, USA*

‘Relying on scholarship from a diversity of academic disciplines, this new edition of *Understanding Public Leadership* provides insight into the most pressing issues in public leadership in current times. It departs from a focus on the individual leader to convincingly convey the message that public leadership should be seen as relational and collaborative. Identifying time and change as contexts and objects of public leadership, ’t Hart and Tummers challenge the reader to reflect on both the state of the art of leadership research and her own leadership practice.’

—Sandra Groeneveld, *Leiden University, the Netherlands*

‘The book contributes significantly to the literature on public leadership by discussing political, administrative and civic leadership. In contrast to the traditional focus on downward influence exerted by single individuals, this book is about leading up, down and out, and it addresses novel issues such as shared leadership. The high scientific level and very useful boxes with practical examples mean that I can unreservedly recommend it to both academics and practitioners.’

—**Lotte Bøgh Andersen, Aarhus University, Denmark**

‘The second edition of *Understanding Public Leadership* is a great resource, particularly for political leaders and public servants aspiring to understand the power, opportunities and vagaries of leadership. It is a wonderful teaching resource in providing a sound and highly relevant theoretical framework linked to contemporary international examples of what has both worked and failed in individual and collective leadership styles and approaches. Importantly for leaders in the public sector, it focusses at its heart on the uniqueness of public, as opposed to private entrepreneurship. Paul ’t Hart and Lars Tummings have delivered a product that will enrich debate on the centrality, rather than marginalisation, of public leadership and its contribution to public value creation.’

—**Ken Smith, Australia and New Zealand School of Government**

‘There is a bizarre gap between the importance of public leadership in times of uncertainty and populism and its neglect in scholarly literature. Paul ’t Hart and Lars Tummings fill this gap brilliantly. Based on a sophisticated analytical scheme, they address the relevant key questions: What are the ingredients of leadership that respond to the requirements of accountability, effective problem solving and overall trustworthiness? How do leadership challenges differ in times of normalcy, accelerated change and crises? How to cope with the tension between responsiveness towards the public and defending the realm of institutional integrity? Despite its analytical depth the book is easy to read due to clarity in style and rich empirical illustrations. In its second edition, it will expand its role as a standard reference for scholars and practitioners alike.’

—**Wolfgang Seibel, University of Konstanz, Germany**

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UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Second Edition

Paul 't Hart and Lars Tummers

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Preface to the Second Edition

It has been gratifying to observe that the first edition of this book, which was published five years ago, has had a significant uptake in several parts of the world. Clearly there are convenors of courses and programmes on public leadership out there who feel that there is value in using a textbook that does not simply transplant generic (mostly business-oriented) insights about leadership to the public sector context. The first edition of this book took the view that the specific characteristics of the public sector – such as its fundamentally political nature, the institutional norms and rhythms of (democratic) governance and the prominent role of public opinion and civil society – shape the nature of its leadership challenges, roles and processes. To understand public leadership we therefore need a language and an analytical toolkit that are attuned to these distinctive characteristics. Building upon and integrating a wide array of both ‘generic’ and ‘sector-specific’ research traditions that is what the first edition of this book sought to offer.

That objective has remained unchanged in this second edition. At the same time, its design and contents have been adapted significantly in light of the experiences and feedback gained during the past years. A second author has come on board. Lars’ deep knowledge of both classic and cutting-edge behavioural public administration and leadership research, as well as on change and innovation in public sector organizations, strongly complements Paul’s original focus on political and administrative elites, public policymaking and crisis management.

In composing the second edition we were determined not to allow the overall length and number of chapters to swell. We have retained the stylistic look and feel of the book, but have made some big calls on its content. It became clear to us that the original edition’s major flaw was that it lacked sustained attention for ‘leading change’, which ironically has been a centrepiece topic in how each of us and many colleagues around the world think about, research and teach leadership. The original ‘memo to an agent of change’ was so different in form and intent from the rest of the book that we have decided to drop it and write an entirely new chapter on leading change that is more aligned to the other chapters.

One other significant change is that we have included the voices of scholars and practitioners of public leadership in a series of new text boxes. We are extremely grateful to Annika Brändström (Ministry of Justice, Sweden), Lotte Bøgh Andersen (Aarhus University and Crown Prince Frederik’s Center for Public Leadership), Richard Callahan (University of San Francisco and editor of the *International Journal of Public Leadership*), Jacqui Curtis (Australian Tax Office), and Wim Kuijken (inaugural Delta Commissioner of the Netherlands and president of the supervisory board of the De Nederlandsche Bank) for sharing their expertise and experiences of public leadership with our readers.

We would like to acknowledge our academic home in the Netherlands, the Utrecht School of Governance (USG) of Utrecht University, a fantastic place to

work for academics like us who enjoy collaborative work and look for a healthy balance between research and impact-oriented activities. We thank the leadership of our school for continuing to promote such a balanced approach, as well as the USG community – secretariat, front office, catering, students, faculty, PhD students and postdocs – that make our school such a wonderful place. We know we are fortunate to be working here.

Paul would like to acknowledge that this project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n° 694266). I also acknowledge the ongoing support of the Netherlands School of Public Administration and its co-deans, Paul Frissen and Mark van Twist, as well as the Australia New Zealand School of Government and its dean Ken Smith. Both continue to provide me with the opportunities to engage with mid-career and senior executive public servants, from whom I have learned at least as much about leadership than I, hopefully, have been able to pass on to them. I am especially thankful to Robbie MacPherson who has inspired me to step out of my comfort zone in the leadership classroom, and whose friendship has been an unexpected but now precious by-product of what has now been nearly a decade of collaboration on two continents.

Lars would like to acknowledge all leaders with whom he has worked in his career. They inspired me to study leadership. This started when I was working as a junior change management consultant at PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) where I experienced some highly inspiring leadership but also witnessed senior executives who in my view acted strangely and counterproductively. I was intrigued by the contrasts and started reading books about leadership. The first one I picked up was by leadership studies pioneer Manfred Kets de Vries, which dealt with narcissism in leadership. It was an enlightening experience that made me understand organizational realities better and deal with them more productively. After a few years of reading, I started doing my own research on leadership, and continue to do so with undiminished enthusiasm. I hope that this book will do for some people what Kets de Vries’s book did for me back then.

As with the first edition, we welcome feedback from colleagues and other users of the book so we can keep it to the point and in tune with the ever-changing tides of leadership research and leadership practice in the public sector. You can contact us at P.tHart@uu.nl and L.G.Tummers@uu.nl.

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1 Introducing Public Leadership

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP: PIVOTAL AND TRICKY

Every group or society needs to be governed if it is to survive and its members are to thrive. And every system of government requires what we have come to think of as ‘leadership’, at least from time to time, for protection, direction, order, inspiration, challenge, transformation. Institutional rules, procedures and routines alone are never enough to tackle the conflicts, changes, surprises, opportunities and challenges that groups and communities encounter. Judging when and how to design, protect, supplement or change governance institutions and creating momentum to act upon those judgements are key functions of public leadership. In most governance systems there are designated roles – high offices in politics, government agencies and professional spheres – that come with a warrant for their bearers to exercise such leadership. But these offices also come with constraints – institutional, professional, ethical – on the ways in which leadership can be exercised. Societies need the creative force that is leadership, but we should also be acutely aware of the risks of channelling too much power, authority and public adulation towards only a few people.

From the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day, many observers of public leadership have chosen to portray it as an art. Leadership, this view holds, cannot be captured in scientific generalizations based on cool, detached observation (Wren 2006). And, by inference, it cannot be taught in the cerebral environment of an academic classroom or executive seminar. Max Weber (1970: 115) was right on the mark when he suggested that the challenge of leadership is to forge warm passion and cool judgement together in one and the same soul – and that in practice this condemns those aspiring to leadership to a life of tough judgement calls between the passion that fires them up, the feeling of personal responsibility that drives them on, and a sense of proportion that is necessary to exercise good judgement.

Leadership as conceived by some of its most authoritative scholars involves a large component of practical wisdom: insight that can only be obtained effectively through direct personal experience and sustained reflection. The vital intangibles of leadership – empathy, intuition, creativity, courage, morality and judgement – are largely beyond the grasp of systematic inquiry, let alone comprehensive explanation and evidence-based prescription. Understanding leadership comes from living it: being led, living with and advising leaders, doing one’s own leading. Some understanding of leadership may be gained from vicarious learning: from digesting the experiences of other leaders. Hence the old-established and steady appetite for

(auto-)biographies of CEOs and politicians, and the more contemporary market for 'live encounters' with high-profile leaders during seminars and conferences. And if we cannot gain access to 'the real thing', we are still willing to pay buckets of money for the next best thing: books and seminars by the exclusive circle of leadership 'gurus' who do manage to observe and interrogate up close the great and the good.

Defying this entrenched view, a 'science of leadership' sprang up from the latter half of the twentieth century. Thousands of academics now make a living treating leadership as they would any other subject in the realm of human affairs – as an object of study, which can be picked apart and reassembled via systematic inquiry (whether of the classical 'scientific' or more interpretive kind), filling journals, handbooks, conference programmes and lecture halls. Many among them make inroads into the real world of public leadership as consultants and advisers, often very well paid. Surely all this would not persist if the kind of knowledge they offered was useless in solving at least some of the puzzles that leaders face and leadership poses?

It is this kind of leadership that we now see echoed in widespread attempts to erect a leadership profession. The language of leadership has pervaded the job descriptions, training and performance management systems of public servants, even at junior management levels. Many public service commissions or equivalent bodies have embarked on developing integrated leadership frameworks in which set bundles of leadership skills are linked to the successful performance of different leadership roles, usually indicated simply by general hierarchical rank rather than specific job characteristics.

People wanting to move up the professional hierarchy must jump through the hoops thus constructed: they must attend set courses, adhere to a set of shared values, write structured job applications and be subjected to standardized tests. When they manage to get all the boxes ticked, they are ushered into a fraternity rather like a Masonic Lodge. Uniformity is nurtured and celebrated through rewards packages. Leadership education is ubiquitous. Everyone attends meetings where leadership gurus perform. The aim is not to impart knowledge, but rather to solidify a shared notion of professionalism. The means for such sharing are the latest nostrums, models and metaphors. The audience is captive, and willingly so, though one might – like leadership scholar Barbara Kellerman (2012) – wonder for how much longer.

Clearly, when taken to extremes, each set of assumptions about 'understanding leadership' leads to preposterous results: the mystification of idiosyncratic 'charisma' in a nearly evidence-free environment versus the imposition of a quasi-scientific 'one size fits all'. Both privilege one form of leadership knowledge over the other. Both generate their own quacks and true believers, who both do very well out of the transaction – but with dubious results as far as quality and particularly diversity in leadership are concerned.

This book shies away from these extremes. By its very nature as a text designed to convey 'what we know about leadership' to a range of students and public sector professionals it embodies the second approach more than it does the first. But

we recognize that there is only so much ‘understanding’ of the subtle, complex and often paradoxical process of public leadership that academics and other observers can distil and transmit.

DEFINITIONS

The terms ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ are incredibly popular. Consulting Google in February 2019 we got more than 1.6 billion hits for the search term ‘leader’ and more than 1.2 billion for ‘leadership’. People pay hefty fees to attend seminars by ‘leadership gurus’, whose books are stacked up high in airport bookshops worldwide. They feed aspiring leaders concepts, stories, maxims and prescriptions. Their work is designed to empower and inspire. In the stories they tell, the roles are clear: there is one leader who knows, questions, analyses, decides, talks, acts, and inspires their staff, supporters and stakeholders to follow them. As we will see, in reality and especially in the public sphere things are a lot more complex. In most polities, political power is never concentrated in a few hands, in most public organizations much leadership work is performed regardless of their formal structures, and citizens groups and social movements tend to have quite diffuse and not seldom fractious collective leadership structures.

Public leaders are people who exercise considerable influence over the way in which communities deal with issues. Such public leaders are often found in high places – holders of public offices: presidents, mayors, ministers, agency heads, members of constitutional courts, police commissioners. Their office accords them certain formal powers as well as the capacity to mobilize attention and resources. By virtue of their positions they are authorized to make strategic decisions. They can initiate policies, change the strategy of the organization, strengthen alliances with important stakeholders, make resources available for large new projects, change the rules for decision-making, focus the agenda of their system on particular issues and get them to disregard others.

But there are also public leaders that are not in formal positions of authority. Public leadership can be exercised by people who do not hold a political office or a senior position in a government organization. These ‘informal leaders’ can be found across public organizations, in civil society groups, in the media, in academia, in the online world. The sources of their ability to influence others vary. They may boast a record of many years of public service, be highly passionate about a particular public issue or possess deep knowledge about an issue. Some are famous, and thus attract a lot of public attention to the causes they pursue. Some are simply highly extraverted, highly energetic and enjoy being with others (Figure 1.1).

How can we tell when public leadership is being exercised? Many scholars have tried to define leadership, but a single dominant definition has never come to pass. In fact there are hundreds, as we show in Box 1.1. Bennis (1989: 259) observed that ‘the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an



Figure 1.1 Varieties of public leadership

Two public leaders are shown above (Malala Yousafzai and Angela Merkel). What makes them so? What are the sources of their influence?

Source: Yousafzai: Russell Watkins/Department for International Development; Merkel: Getty Images/Feng Li

endless proliferation of terms to deal with it ... and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.’ Leadership theorist Fred Fiedler likewise noted that ‘there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are leadership theories – and there are as many theories of leadership as there are psychologists working in the field’ (1967: 1). In other words, leadership is a ‘magic’ or ‘golden’ concept, one that inspires scholars and practitioners and that everyone is for. But it also vague, meaning everything and nothing at the same time (Pollitt and Hupe 2011; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984).

Box 1.1 Leadership’s definitional bonanza

Many scholars have tried to define leadership. Here is a number of classic and relevant – but also quite diverse – definitions of leadership.

‘Exercising leadership is trading in hope.’

Ascribed to Napoleon Bonaparte, who by any standard was a gifted practitioner of leadership, this notion suggests that the key function of leadership is to imbue followers and constituencies with a sense of direction and a sense of optimism and empowerment about their ability to make progress, even in difficult circumstances.

(Continued)

'Leadership is an interpersonal relation in which others comply because they want to, not because they have to.'

Echoing Napoleon, sociologist Robert Merton (1969: 2615) highlights that leadership is a form of persuasion that drives on psychic rewards and positive interventions, such as inspiring speeches, bonuses and recognition. A leadership relationship therefore differs from an authority relationship.

'Leadership is the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members.'

In a large project systematically studying leadership in 61 nations, Robert House and colleagues (2002: 5) look especially at the individual within organizations. Leadership is also defined by its outcomes, but given its positive slant it is difficult to integrate 'bad' leadership in this definition.

'Leadership is a process of attributing causation to individual social actors.'

In an influential article in *the Academy of Management Review*, Jeffrey Pfeffer (1977: 104) suggests that it is often problematic to pinpoint whether leadership truly moves others or has societal effects. It is more interesting to study leaders as symbols and when and why people attribute something to leadership. Whereas it is hard to establish with certainty whether a particular policy success or organizational failure is truly the fault of the leader, it is more valuable and feasible to analyse how different constituencies hold their leaders accountable for successes and failures.

'Leadership is a formal or informal contextually rooted and goal-influencing process that occurs between a leader and a follower, group of followers, or institutions.'

Gleaned from a recent overview book by Antonakis and Day (2017: 6), this definition emphasizes that leadership is rooted in a particular context, and manifests itself in group and/or institutional settings.

'Leadership is about disappointing people at a rate they can stand.'

Where Napoleon creates an understanding of leadership as leading from the front, showing the way and inspiring people to follow, Harvard scholar Ronald Heifetz argues that heroic conceptions of leadership breed 'inappropriate dependencies' on all-knowing, all-powerful authority figures. This is particularly so in complex situations where no single person can be expected to have all the answers and progress can only be made by the system as a whole stepping up and learning. Leaders can prompt this to happen by asking hard questions and keeping people focused on the issues, but purposefully *not* articulate a vision and set direction.

Box 1.1 demonstrates just how versatile – or, if one wants to be less kind, how opaque – the phenomenon of leadership and our ways of understanding it really are (see also Bass and Stogdill 1990). Yukl (2012) studied the various definitions used by scholars and noted that many conceptualize leadership as a process whereby intentional influence is exercised over other people to guide, structure and facilitate some common purpose or endeavour. We will place ourselves in this tradition and broadly conceive of public leadership as a process of influencing people to think or act differently concerning public issues from what they would otherwise have done. Hence effective leaders are able to move others – for good, as when Martin Luther King inspired around 250,000 people of all colours and creeds to walk with him during the Freedom March, as well as for bad – think of Hitler’s mesmerizing of the crowds at massive rallies in the late 1930s.

As far as leadership in (public) organizations is concerned it is furthermore important to distinguish between the work of leadership and the work of management. According to Barnard (1938) leadership is a strategic activity focused on determining the direction of the organization. Management is operational: it involves developing a structure of rules, penalties and rewards that ensures that the organization can continue to work well. Likewise, for Kotter (1996) ‘management’ encompasses all activities that ensure that an organization continues to perform in its current form: hiring and firing, measuring performance, analysing budgets, maintaining relations with the press, conducting performance interviews with staff, attending network meetings and so on. In this vein, public management aims to bring a degree of order, consistency and rationality to the administration of public programmes and the delivery of public services. Kotter then goes on to say that ‘leadership’ is about dealing with change and its implications for the future of policies, programmes and systems. Such changes are manifold. The world is confronted with abrupt as well as creeping technological, demographic, economic, strategic-military, regulatory and sociocultural changes that put pressure on existing public policies and institutions. Discerning them and working out what they might mean and how existing systems should adapt to them or be transformed by them is extraordinarily challenging work.

Note that the Kotterian distinction between leadership and management does not amount to saying that every leader is, or should be, an agent of change. The work of public leadership is subtler than that. Exercising public leadership can be about the preservation as much as it can be about the transformation of public institutions, policies, programmes, organizations and networks. Making such a definitional distinction does not mean that when your job title is ‘manager’ you cannot exercise leadership. ‘Managers’ are required to undertake leadership work from time to time; and the reflection, direction and dynamism that leadership can bring to a group or system amounts to nothing if there is not also a degree of ‘management’ to make sure that the system pursues its goals in an orderly fashion. For example, the success of the African National Congress (ANC) in breaking the spine of apartheid was not just due to Mandela’s front-stage charismatic and moral leadership; it was also due to the careful back-stage management of the resistance work and the delicate relationships, finances and logistics involved by people such as Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki and Walter Sisulu.

We know that when senior public servants describe one of their colleagues as ‘a good manager, but not a leader’ this is not even faint praise and this colleague’s chances of promotion are dead. However, we think this reflects an underappreciation of the immense value-creating role of sound management practices. It is important not to downgrade the significance of good management in almost every human endeavour. While an under-led organization may over time atrophy and become irrelevant (if not die), an under-managed organization is tantamount to chaos, confusion, waste and quite possibly corruption. Management and leadership are the yin and yang of human projects: fundamentally different but complementary. None can do without the other. In this book we happen to focus on understanding how public leadership is exercised, but not at the price of sanctifying it above all other roles and skill sets that are necessary for conducting the public’s business.

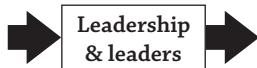
Now that we have defined and demarcated our object of interest in this book – public leadership – it is time to situate the study of leadership as it has evolved over the decades and centuries. In the remainder of this chapter we will briefly highlight some key analytical perspectives on ‘understanding public leadership’ and salute the research traditions to which they have given rise.

STUDYING CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Leadership is most often portrayed as a *cause* of certain societal or organizational outcomes: through leadership processes, things happen. But in leadership studies, many scholars also look at leadership as a consequence: things happen that affect leaders’ power, credibility and behaviour. This is shown in [Figure 1.2](#) and discussed below.

Topics for leadership as a consequence

- What personality characteristics determine who becomes a leader?
- How can we be less biased when selecting our leaders?
- What makes leaders take very risky decisions?
- How are leaders socialized?
- Which appearances, behaviour and personality traits of aspiring politicians are valued by the public?



Topics for leadership as a cause

- Are leadership strategies effective in all situations or context-dependent?
- What are positive and negative effects of narcissistic leaders?
- Do value-laden speeches lead to more engagement?
- Are politically-savvy administrative leaders more effective?
- Does distributed leadership result in more equality?

Figure 1.2 Studying leadership and leaders as a consequence or cause