

Unifying Leadership: Bridging the Theory and Practice Divide

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A constant tension exists in the leadership community between the supposed disparate worlds of theory and practice. The growing chasm between concept and context causes consternation on both sides, yet there is little action to span the divide. While there are numerous obstacles to closing this gap, an examination of a parallel relationship in the Christian realm of faith and works reveals the intermediary role of reason in bringing the conceptual and practical worlds together. This model reveals the need for a clearly defined middle span of analysis, bringing concepts into specific context, to connect the sides of leadership theory and practice. This leadership analysis, a discipline often covered by leadership consultants and coaches, is the collaborative forum to connect the two worlds. Analysis resurrects the importance of theory in the life of the leader, and it provides a feedback mechanism for theorists to improve their concepts. Through the employment of this construct, the theory-practice divide may still exist, but only by individual consent and inaction, not because it must.

“In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.”
- Yogi Berra.¹

Despite the ever-increasing proliferation of leadership texts, the chasm between leadership theory and practice remains expansive. While this almost natural separation between the theoretical and the practical worlds is not unique to leadership studies, the lack of connection undermines the quality of both disciplines and results in unnecessary hardship by practitioners and inadequately informed efforts by theorists. To address this challenge, the divinely crafted relationship between faith, reason, and works provides a perfect model for helping contemporary leaders bridge the gap between the practice of leadership and its theoretical foundations.

Theory-Practice Gap

In order to evaluate the appropriateness of any “bridging” solution, it is first necessary to understand the nature and causes of the gap between the realms. While the separation is clearly conceptual in nature, there is little question it exists because the disconnect contributes to tangible effects for leaders and leadership scholars. The better question is “why gaps remain between theory and practice after more than a century of research.”² While some argue the gap is simply the product of cultural differences and not the result of clear lines of conflict on particular aspects of leadership, the causal factors of roles, attitudes, timelines, language and separation warrant further consideration.

Different Roles

In addressing a similar gap in the field of political science, Dr. Joseph Nye commented, “Some academics celebrate the appropriateness of the gap. After all, academic theorists and policy makers fill different roles in society.”³ He expounded on the role separation by stating, “The academic ethic is to offer elegant theoretical answers to general questions while the policy maker seeks definite answers to particular questions.”⁴ From this perspective, the divide appears to be more of a division of labor than an obstacle. Unfortunately, the beneficial diversity of roles is not followed by a reconnecting mechanism to ensure unity of effort across the board. Instead, both camps pursue parochial agendas with separate bottom lines. The academics pursue new concepts and bore deeper holes in existing ones to build resumes, while practitioners forgo most theoretical discussions because of urgent organizational demands. The different roles, without a unifying construct, foster the theory-practice divide.

Attitudes, Arrogance, and Separation

The worlds of theory and practice are also separated by the timeless vices of pride and prejudice. Practitioners look disparagingly at academics as out of touch and unable to deal with the harsh realities of “the real world,” while theorists sit back in the ivory tower and scoff at the “obvious” missteps of those in the arena. The physical separation of the two communities only serves to exacerbate these stereotypes and increase the divide. The fragmentation of the leadership school of thought also makes the creation of appropriate individual and communal feedback mechanisms very difficult. As will be discussed later, these feedback loops are essential in fostering the natural connections between the worlds of theory and practice. As a final point on this issue, the attitude of each “camp” must contain realistic expectations laced with charity toward the other side for any sustainable connection to exist. “Practitioners who seek quick fixes and simple solutions to complex and dynamic situations will not find single answers in the literature. Instead, they will gain valuable insights and illumination on complex issues. Researchers who seek linear relationships and independent variables will have difficulty isolating them in the multiple sets of relationships that exist in practice.”⁵

Temporal Disconnect

Another wedge between these two realms is the different timelines on which they operate. Nye points out, “A premium on time is a major difference between the two cultures. For the academic, time is a secondary consideration, while accuracy and elegance are primary. For practitioners, timing is everything.”⁶ This temporal disconnect is further exacerbated by the different paces of the two communities. While both communities are busy, practitioners lack the discretionary time to read the tomes of information typically produced in the myriad leadership journals by the academic community. The propensity of the academic community to operate on long time horizons and produce cumbersome products conflicts directly with the practitioners’ desire for rapid, digestible pieces of information. “They [practitioners] want short quick answers while for many academics such short answers are not answers at all.”⁷ The final aspect of the temporal disconnect has to do with the developmental timeline for many practitioners. These individuals complete their academic study in their twenties and then proceed to immerse themselves in the operational world of leadership. Without intentional efforts to maintain a lifelong approach to learning, practitioners quickly become disconnected from their theoretical foundations, lose touch with the evolution of leadership thought and begin to rely solely on their experience. In the end, each of these temporal disconnects, whether due to job demands, operational timelines, and developmental approaches, further separates the partners in the field of leadership.

Different language / Different audience

The final divisive aspect of the relationship between leadership theorists and practitioners deals with the language they use and their primary audience. Theorists have a tendency to employ heavy doses of academic jargon and often seem unable to write in the simple, straightforward language preferred by practitioners. Again, a parallel in the policy realm is useful. Alex George states, “Not a few policy specialists exposed to the scholarly literature have concluded that most university professors seem to write largely for one another and have little inclination or ability to communicate their knowledge in terms comprehensible to policy makers.”⁸ Furthermore, when leadership academics do publish, they tend to pursue the vast array of semi-obscure leadership journals that few beyond the university setting even know exist. This creates almost zero interaction between the leading edge theorists and the leaders in the trenches. The publications that end up in most practitioners’ hands are the shallow products of celebrity CEOs and leadership gurus that tend to be case studies in survivorship bias.⁹ Therefore, disconnects in language and the lack of a common discussion forum continue to work against the unification of theory and practice.

Sources of Separation

- 1. Role Distinction**
- 2. Attitudes, Arrogance, & Separation**
- 3. Temporal Disconnect**
- 4. Languages & Audience**

Irreconcilable Differences?

“He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards a ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.” - Leonardo da Vinci¹⁰

***“Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play.”
-Immanuel Kant¹¹***

The review of causes for the theory-practice separation could lead some to conclude there is little chance of bridging the gap between the two communities. Fortunately, the benefits of bringing theory and practice together are more than sufficient to warrant the effort. The decision to close this gap lies at both the individual and community levels. What may appear as irreconcilable differences on the grand scale can be quickly resolved by individual leaders willing to make the necessary adjustments. The motivation for leaders to pursue this goal lies in the numerous benefits that come from the connection of theory and practice.

The quotes above from da Vinci and Kant provide stern warnings to those who would choose to reside in the disconnected state. For practitioners, engaging the theoretical realm may not be enjoyable, but it is beneficial. “Theory is as necessary as it is unavoidable. Without it, it would be impossible to learn or to act in a consistent fashion; without generalizations and abstractions, the work would exist for us only as a chaotic patchwork of discrete, disconnected experiences and sensory impressions.”¹² Deming argues that even the most hardened practitioners need the interaction with theory or they will quickly lose focus. “Rational prediction requires theory and builds knowledge through systematic revision and extension of theory based on comparison of prediction with observation. It is an extension of application that discloses inadequacy of a theory, and need for revision, or even new theory. Again, without theory, there is nothing to revise. Without theory, experience has no meaning. Without theory, one has no questions to ask. Hence without theory, there is no learning.”¹³

Theory-Practice Connection

- 1. Components meaningless in isolation***
- 2. Natural partnership***
- 3. Perfect feedback loop***

There is a natural partnership between the intellectual efforts to understand the art and science of leadership and the day-to-day physical actions taken to execute it. This partnership is akin to the architect-contractor-builder connection in which a solid relationship results in the clear translation of the conceptual into tangible actions and results. As Nye points out, “Academics can also help...by framing, mapping, and raising questions even when they do not provide answers. Framing a question is often as important to policy as providing answers.”¹⁴

The relationship is one in which, “theory serves as a mirror, within which the memories of practice are examined and questioned and transformed; it is a reflective surface in which the inscription of social, cultural, political, and ideological patterns is made visible and accessible.”¹⁵

Just as theory provides the vector needed to channel leadership efforts, those same leadership efforts provide the requisite feedback to theorists, in the form of observations and experiences, to enable creation, validation and refinement of leadership theories. When appropriately connected, both sides benefit because this natural feedback cycle results in higher quality theories and more tailored leadership tools. At this point, it is no longer a question of practice driving theory or theory informing practice. Both “serve as an amalgam that shapes a critical experience of practice transforming theory and theory challenging practice.”¹⁶

Theoreticians and practitioners operate in the realm of leadership amidst a natural tension, a tension common in the social sciences. This natural friction tends to drive the two “realms” apart and degrade the quality of work in both. The goal of both camps must be to find ways to bridge the divide, and a perfect way to pursue this is through the faith-reason-works model presented in the Christian Scriptures.

Blueprint for a Bridge

“I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forego their use.” – Galileo Galilei

“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” “You see that his [Abraham’s] faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” – James 2:17, 22

The process for connecting the theoretical and practical worlds requires effort and a deliberate road map. Since this challenge of connection is not unique to the realm of leadership, one could choose to look to other professional fields, such as medicine, law, or politics, to seek answers. Sadly, each of these fields faces similar disconnects on the organizational and individual levels; therefore, they fail to provide any concrete instructions. Fortunately, there is one school of thought that has succeeded in providing a comprehensive approach to bridging the gap – Christianity. Whether a devout believer or a complete skeptic, this approach holds great utility for those willing to examine the divine plan for connecting the worlds of thought and action. To ensure the clarity of this discussion, this section will present the blueprint and the next will discuss the application to the realm of leadership.

As one might expect of a divine model, the Christian framework focuses on complete and coordinated effort by the individual. It consists of the three primary areas of faith, reason, and works and their corresponding human domains of heart, soul, and body. While the connection is not explicitly laid out in Scripture, the separate domains are clearly depicted and the intention of their interdependence is fairly easy to discern for those who would look closely. In one of the most pivotal passages of the Old Testament, called the Shema, Moses commands the Israelites to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”¹⁷

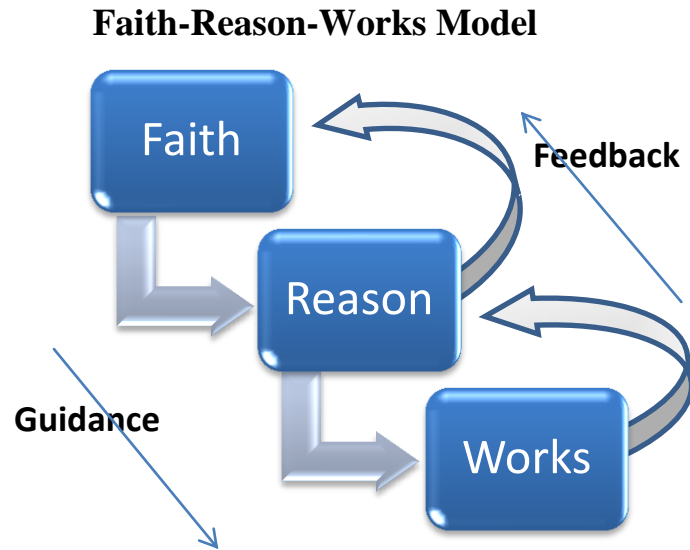
This same passage is referenced by Jesus in the New Testament when asked which commandment was the most important. Showing full awareness of man's tendency toward fractionalization and disunity, God commands that the totality of man's efforts be unified in love.¹⁸ This complete commitment of the domains is part of divine intent. God did not create faith, reason, and works as independent mechanisms to function in isolation to cover the various challenges people face. Instead, He crafted an elaborate interdependent system in which each component fills both distinct and collaborative roles. In keeping with God's design for free will, individuals may choose not to coordinate these activities or may neglect the function of individual components. However, this results in unreasoned faith, frustrated reason, and misguided works.

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”¹⁹ These two components work together to guide the individual in decision-making and daily action. For Christians, faith must lead this coordinated effort. “If we wish to be rational, not now and then, but constantly, we must pray for the gift of Faith, for the power to go on believing not in the teeth of reason but in the teeth of lust and terror and jealousy and boredom and indifference that which reason, authority, or experience, or all three, have once delivered to us for truth.”²⁰

In execution, faith provides the vector or direction for individual movement based on divine principles. In order to pursue this vector, the individual must apply the skills of reason to generate the necessary specifics or decisions to move forward on a daily or lifelong basis. In the process, reasoning provides a feedback loop to the individual's faith that serves “not merely as a debunking device, but as a cleansing tool to maintain clarity and root out false views.”²¹ As the individual moves forward, he is confronted with issues and choices that require the continued application of faith and reason as the enabler for works. Through the experiences and consequences of individual actions, feedback is once again provided to the other domains in a continuing process designed to elevate individual capability and performance in all three realms. In God's masterful design, faith provides the basis for reason, reason challenges and safeguards faith while driving works, and individual action provides experience to strengthen faith and improve reason.

Christian Linkages for Theory-Practice

- 1. Faith – Foundational Concepts and Internal Commitment***
- 2. Reason – Intellectual Contemplation & Adjudication of Ideas***
- 3. Works – Individual Deliberate Actions***



Spanning the Leadership Divide

After examining the Christian bridging mechanism, it is now time to apply the template to the realm of leadership. By simply matching the existing components of faith, reason and works from the Christian model to the theory and practice elements, it becomes obvious that the connecting span missing from the leadership bridge is the equivalent of reason.²² While this is not a perfect parallel and there are obvious important distinctions between faith and theory, the structural parallel is valuable. The conclusion may seem trivial at first, but its significance grows under closer examination.

Much of the difficulty in the leadership realm comes from attempts to connect the theoretical and practical worlds directly without the middle span of analysis. This is equivalent to not having a transmission in an automobile and expecting the pistons to turn the wheels—it was never designed to work that way. The intermediate mechanism is essential to translating utility from one realm to the next. In leadership, theories are not developed to the level of specificity needed for direct application by those “in the trenches.” Analysis must be done to tailor the conceptual ideas and enable their application to specific contexts.

Making the Bridge: Faith to Theory

- 1. Faith - Theory***
- 2. Reason - (The Missing Link)***
- 3. Works - Practice***

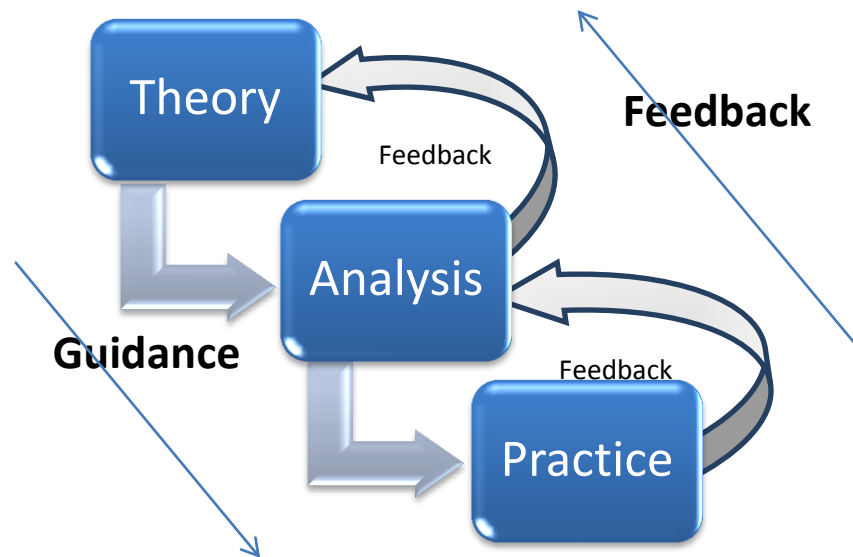
Just as Christian reasoning is guided by a solid foundation in faith, leadership analysis must be grounded in leadership theory. Analysis is required because “All theories have elements of both truth and uncertainty. What makes a certain leadership theory more useful than others is - the situation.”²³ Analysis is the translational mechanism that makes theory relevant and ready for use. Analysis also includes the critical assessments of the leader, follower, and situation or task necessary for specific application. Good Christian reason seeks to find ways to infuse the weighty concepts of faith with the complex demands of daily living and this is best done with a thorough understanding of both realms. Leadership analysis has the comparable task of taking hundreds of years of leadership thought and melding it into the boardroom, the overseas manufacturing site, and the cubicle.

The real “ah-ha” moment for leaders comes when each realizes that, unless they plan to live with constant consultant/leadership coach support, they must become the analyst they need. While few leaders want to add to their workload, this realization fundamentally changes the theory-practice debate. Leaders can no longer scoff at the theoretical world as irrelevant. They are confronted with the reality that the realm of theory is intended to be their toolshed, and it is their responsibility to understand the tools and to know when and how to apply them. The incredible rise of leadership consultants and quick-fix leadership texts over the last decade is evidence that many leaders have abdicated their responsibility in the analysis role. Abdication occurs because analysis is arguably the most challenging aspect of leadership. While deriving theories can be laborious and their implementation challenging, the intellectual heavy lifting occurs in trying to analyze the myriad variables and find the right leadership tool for the current challenge. Analysis forces the leader to grapple with complex issues. This wrestling produces understanding, and understanding enables accurate decision-making.

Another reason the analytical step is critical to bridging the theory-practice divide is the feedback it provides in the process. If theory is viewed as a model for “detailed analysis, describing patterns and possible solutions,”²⁴ it is easy to see that the analysis step is intended to be the refining mechanism for the theory. Just as leadership practice provides feedback to the leader in the form of experience, leadership analysis is intended to provide feedback to those formulating leadership theory to allow continued improvement of the concepts. While the conduct of analysis does not resolve the communication shortfall between the academic and practitioner communities, it can resolve the role, time, and lexicon issues by creating a middle ground conversation forum that is value-added for both worlds.

The entire leadership community benefits from ceasing attempts to connect the realms of theory and practice directly. Instead, both sides should support filling the void with robust analysis. By following the model that reason plays in connecting faith and good works for Christians, theory regains its appropriate prominence and practitioners are empowered with the resources needed to solve the toughest leadership challenges. The suggested three-component model with feedback loops allows us to follow Peter Northouse’s advice and view leadership not as “a linear one-way event, but rather an interactive event.”²⁵ With the appropriate connections in place and roles clearly defined, there is no longer a gap to close.

Applying the Faith-Reason-Works Model to Leadership



Final Thoughts

In the end, the real conclusion is that the separation of leadership theory and practice is a self-inflicted divide. While there are natural frictions in the process and the interaction between the theoretical and practical worlds is rarely smooth, a symbiotic connection is possible through the inclusion of analysis as the interfacing process. Just as reason plays a critical bridging role in bringing together faith and works in the daily lives of Christians, analysis holds the connecting span to making theory relevant and useful to leaders. The theory-practice divide effectively closes as leaders take the time to understand theoretical concepts, hone their skills to conduct analysis for leadership application, and promote interaction between the communities through feedback on leadership analysis and experience. Likewise, the academic world can promote the connection by seeking to collaborate with individual leaders during the analysis and promoting opportunities for feedback from those who have seen their theories in action. Given these approaches and the appropriate attitudes, the theory-practice gap only exists by our consent and inaction, not because it must.

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John Price is a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force currently serving as a research fellow in the National Defense Fellows Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He holds a Master of Science in Strategy and Campaign Planning from the National Defense University, a Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership from George Washington University, and a Master of Arts in Management from Regent University, where he is currently a first-year doctoral student in strategic leadership. Previously, Lieutenant Colonel Price was a C-17 squadron commander and a strategic planner at U.S. Pacific Command Headquarters.

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