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## POLYCHRONIC LEADER: WHAT WOULD LEADERSHIP RESEARCH LOOK LIKE IF WE CONSIDERED POLYCHRONICITY?

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*This paper proposes that research in the area of leadership would be enriched and enhanced by the explicit consideration of temporal variables, specifically polychronicity. Effective leadership involves engagement with multiple tasks, activities, and constituencies, often simultaneously. As a construct concerned with multiple task engagement and time use preferences, polychronicity is ideally situated to inform future research studies conducted to investigate a variety of extant leadership theories and traditions.*

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### INTRODUCTION

"Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing." Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985: 5).

The above sentiment has been a reoccurring theme throughout the work of Warren Bennis (e.g., 1989, 1997). It is an arresting turn of a phrase meant to draw our attention to a potentially salient distinction between management and leadership, especially as leadership research has evolved over the past twenty or so years. It does not consider management in the Fayolian sense where management subsumed leadership as one of its core functions (Wren, 2005). Instead it asks us to consider management and leadership as two different, albeit organizationally important, activities and roles. That managers can be leaders is allowed, but each encompasses its own unique realm of activities and organizational relevant outcomes.

The practice of management and what managers do in organizations is considered to be technical in nature. It has an administrative and bureaucratic focus concerned with the maintenance of the organization in a linear, day-to-day fashion, with a concentration on details and minutiae so as to guarantee smooth operation. Due to the accumulation of many activities ("things") managing may potentially allow for incremental improvement but only along a trajectory that has already been determined. Leadership on the other hand is considered to be holistic, concerned with the big picture and the long term, where the outcome is a culmination of a myriad of actions, initiatives, and changes designed to produce the "thing" of a competitive organizational culture animated by a compelling, transformational, and authentic vision.

Bennis' aim is to shift our focus and efforts away from the maintenance of the status quo and toward the creation of something new. He uses "thing" in two

different senses of the term. The manager engages in "things" or tasks and activities in furtherance of a "thing" that already exists (i.e., an organization and its goals), while the leader creates that "thing" (an organization and its goals) that the manager strives to maintain. The leader accomplishes this through his or her activities and interactions with others, and his or her responses to events and environmental forces. This conceptualization of a leader as creative and "transformational" is reflective of a major direction in leadership scholarship over the last quarter century (e.g., Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg, 2004), which owes much to the pioneering work of Bass (1985) and Burns (1978), and is certainly reflective of a world and an economy in transition undergoing fundamental change from industrial to post-industrial (knowledge and information driven) (e.g., D'Aveni, 1994; Drucker, 1993; Fukuyama, 1999, 2002; Toffler, 1971, 1980, 1990).

What if, however, we took Bennis (and Nanus) at face value? What if we interpreted "managers do the right things" to imply that managers are multitasking, or, more appropriately, polychronic? And took leaders, who "do the right thing," to be single-tasking, or monochronic? Do managers do many things and leaders only one thing? There exists a body of organizational research that investigates this concept of task engagement and the use of time (summarized in Bluedorn, 2002). What would leadership research look like if it considered the integration of this key temporal construct of polychronicity? How would our understanding and practice of leadership (and management) be informed and enriched? Additionally, how would our understanding and practice of polychronicity and the broader notion of organizational time and temporality be informed and enriched?

Time as an organizational concern has drawn recent attention (e.g., Barkema, Baum & Mannix, 2002;

Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; George & Jones, 2000; Goodman, Lawrence, Ancona, & Tushman, 2001; Hassard, 1991, 1996). However, as a concern it is as old as the field of management and organizational studies, harkening back to the work of Frederick W. Taylor, and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (Wren, 2005). Recent scholarship continues to highlight the critical role that a better understanding of time and temporal perspectives could play in furthering our understanding and management of organizations (e.g., Bluedorn, 2002; Bluedorn & Standifer, 2006). The absence of the word "leadership" relative to organizations in the last sentence was deliberate. Despite the ongoing importance of leadership research and the growing recognition of the need to consider time as an organizational variable, there has been very little research that explicitly integrates the growing base of organizational time research into established leadership research. There are some notable recent exceptions such as Clemens and Dalrymple (2005), Das (1993), Judge and Spitzfaden (1995), and Thoms (2004).

Of historical importance is the work of Elliott Jaques. Jaques investigated the relationship between time span capacity, the time span over which one has discretion, and one's level in an organization (e.g., 1956, 1964). As one moves up in an organization (i.e., takes on increasingly formalized leadership roles) the time span over which one has responsibility lengthens, and may be related to organizational success (Jaques & Cason, 1994). Time can be considered to be a critical organizational variable (Jaques, 1982). Jaques' work is not without its critics (e.g., Goodman 1967); however, in an empirical study of Jaques' concept of time span Goodman did conclude "although time span did not seem to be related to organizational structure, it cannot be discounted as an important variable in organizational studies" (1967: 170). Unfortunately, these early attempts to discuss management and leadership with regard to temporal variables have not been built upon extensively through the explicit further integration of time and leadership.

This paper will attempt to begin this process by explicitly integrating the temporal concept of polychronicity into the context of leadership research, as represented by seven historically important schools of research in leadership. First, polychronicity will be defined and its multidimensional nature will be discussed. Second, an established typology of eight schools of leadership research will be introduced (Antonakis et al., 2004). Finally, the integration of polychronicity into seven of the eight schools of leadership will be briefly considered. The primary purpose of this paper is the

stimulation of further thought as to the possible beneficial integration of leadership and organizational time research, using polychronicity as an example.

### Polychronicity

Polychronicity was developed by Edward T. Hall (1959, 1976, 1983, 1992, 1994; Bluedorn, 1998) and has been extended and integrated into the organizational literature (e.g., Bluedorn, 2002). Allen Bluedorn offered the following definition: "Polychronicity is the extent to which people (1) prefer to be engaged in two or more tasks or events simultaneously and are actually so engaged (the preference strongly implying the behavior and vice versa), and (2) believe their preference to be the best way to do things" (2002: 51).

Of note, is the sense that polychronicity or one's time (or task) engagement preference is both a characteristic of the individual, a potentially enduring trait, and also a behavior in which an individual engages. The state-trait nature of this aspect of temporality is still to be worked out (see George & Jones [2000] for a discussion of the ongoing exploration of the state-trait nature of temporality).

Bluedorn's (2002) definition represents a narrow focused approach to polychronicity (i.e., focusing on time use and one's preference for engaging in one or more than one task at a time). This definition adequately captures the lay sense of "multitasking," which is a term derived from computer science detailing a computer's performance of running multiple programs concurrently. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the etymology of the term to the mid 1960s (1966). Hall introduced his concept (then labeled monochronicity - the "one thing at a time" pole of the polychronicity continuum) in his 1959 book. For this paper the use of polychronicity is preferred over multitasking since there is a developing research literature investigating polychronicity as a management and organizational variable and construct. No such literature appears to exist for multitasking, although a recent popular press article (i.e., Wall Street Journal) did report anecdotal evidence of the negative consequences of multitasking as it may contribute to the increased occurrence of errors (Sandberg, 2006).

Additionally, and very germane for our purposes, there exists a broader definition of polychronicity that is discernible throughout Hall's work. Hall focused on polychronicity at the level of cultures and societies; he viewed it as a cultural variable. Over the course of his work he described a "polychronicity" that was much richer than its narrower definition of simply "time use preference." Integral to his use of polychronicity were

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two additional dimensions: context (communication style) and time tangibility (definition of time's fundamental nature). Context is concerned with an individual's use of information in interpersonal relationships. A person can be low context with a focus on the literal meaning of a communication, or a person can be high context and focus on not only the message but also the full "context" within which the message is embedded. A high context message may be nuanced and open to multiple interpretations which are dependent on contextual factors such as the relationship of the parties involved (Munster, 1993). Time Tangibility describes a person's understanding of time's fundamental nature. Is it "tangible" in a physical or Newtonian sense, or is it simply an "intangible" backdrop against which events and lives play out (McGrath & Kelly, 1992; McGrath & Rotchford, 1983).

Culturally, Hall considered Northern and Western Europe (e.g., United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland), and Anglo North America to be "Monochronic" which meant a profile of monochronic (preferring to engage in one task at a time), low context (a literal communication style), and time tangible (viewing time as a scarce and valuable resource, one to be managed carefully [amenable to "time management"]). He labeled Mediterranean Europe, Latin America, and Asia as "polychronic" which implied a profile of polychronic (preferring to engage in many tasks at a time), high context (using a rich and nuanced communication style), and time intangible (not viewing time as a tangible and hence manageable resource) (Hall 1983, O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994). Hall viewed the resulting complexes or profiles (i.e., monochronic/low context/time tangible and polychronic/high context/time intangible) as natural where each component facilitated and reinforced the others (Palmer & Schoorman, 1999). For example, the engagement in one task at a time with a focus upon its completion (monochronic) is facilitated by the use of information in a highly compartmentalized manner with no distractions or interruptions (anything unrelated to the task at hand) (low context) and the efficient use of the resource of time as a criterion of engagement and completion (e.g., preference for scheduling).

Palmer and Schoorman (1999) explored the multi-dimensional nature of polychronicity and found the three dimensions to be more independent than Hall had assumed. They hypothesized and found within a sample of 258 executives evidence of all eight types if one crosses the three dimensions (2 x 2 x 2). They found that 31.8% of their sample conformed to Hall's Classic

Monochronic, but only 1.9% conformed to his Classic Polychronic. Interestingly 44.2% of the participants were found to be what was labeled Type A Prone (polychronic/low context/time tangible - similar to the characteristics of the Type A Behavior Pattern) and another 10.5% were labeled (polychronic/high context/time tangible). Potentially driving these findings (e.g., the near total absence of "classic polychronics") may have been the nature of the sample as a mix of executives from a number of different countries. It has been suggested that a global managerial culture may be emerging (Takeshi, 2002) and an aspect of that culture may be the recognition of time as tangible and, thus, a resource that requires managing as would any other valuable organizational resource. It is possible that the time intangible individuals have been selected-out (through initial staffing decisions or terminations) or have self-selected-out of the managerial class as suggested by Attraction-Selection-Attrition theory (Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

Polychronicity has been explored at multiple levels of analysis and in multiple organizational applications. For example, it has been employed at the micro level of the individual in studies investigating questions of an individual's fit with his or her work and workplace (e.g., Hecht & Allen, 2005; Slocombe and Bluedorn, 1999), at the group or departmental level (Lee, 1999; Waller, Giambatista, and Zellmer-Bruhn, 1999); and at the macro level of organizations (Onken, 1999). Additionally, it has been investigated with empirical approaches (e.g., Hecht & Allen) as well as innovative qualitative approaches (e.g., Cotte & Ratneshwar, 1999). Despite the growing body of research further work still needs to be done to more fully understand and refine this construct. However, the early preliminary findings indicate that it is a versatile, multi-level, and cross-cultural variable. Additionally, it incorporates both the task and social domains as does leadership, and therefore, may help inform leadership research. In pursuing this research it may be most useful to employ the broader multidimensional conceptualization of polychronicity that Hall developed, especially if investigating leadership in cross-cultural settings.

### Seven Schools of Leadership

It has become almost a truism in leadership research that it is a topic that generates a large volume of studies and just about as many definitions of leadership to go along with those studies. "Most of these definitions don't agree with each other, and many of them would seem quite remote to the leaders whose skills are being

dissected" (Bennis & Nanus, 1985: 4-5). Bearing that in mind Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg provided the following definition in an attempt to capture the attendant richness of the various definitions and should suffice for our purposes: "Most leadership scholars probably would agree, in principle, that leadership can be defined as the nature of the influencing process - and its resultant outcomes - that occurs between a leader and followers and how this influencing process is explained by the leader's dispositional characteristics and behaviors, follower perceptions and attributions of the leader, and the context in which the influencing process occurs" (2004: 5).

Building on their definition of leadership Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg (2004) also provided an overview of the research and described eight distinct streams of research, each with historical importance to the development of our current understanding of leadership in organizations. Their development of the framework drew on previous attempts by Dansereau, Yammarino, and Markham (1995), House and Aditya (1997), and Lowe and Gardner (2000). Of the eight "schools" of research that Antonakis et al. (2004) suggested the Trait, Contextual, New Leadership, and Information-Processing schools are currently "very active." The Contingency and Relational Schools are "moderately active," and the Behavioral and Skeptics (e.g., Calder, 1977; Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987) schools are "mostly inactive," with the Behavioral at present mostly subsumed within the Contingency and Transformational. This paper will briefly discuss polychronicity within the context of seven of these eight schools.

**Trait School of Leadership.** This school represents a stream of research reaching back 100 or more years which originally investigated the "great man" premise that leaders were "born." This stream posits that leaders possess certain stable traits which would differentiate them from non-leaders. This stream has occasionally engendered controversy and disappointment but is undergoing resurgence, especially in light of its potential to illuminate possible traits of transformational/charismatic leaders (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2004; Lowe & Gardner, 2000).

**Behavioral School of Leadership.** This stream of research grew out of early frustration with the trait approach. The focus shifted from stable traits of leaders to investigating the behaviors of leaders, where the behaviors would conceivably be trainable, as opposed to inherent as would be the case with innate traits. This area is best exemplified by the classic University of Michigan

and Ohio State studies. Antonakis et al. (2004: 7) suggested that many of the ideas of this approach have subsequently been subsumed within the contingency and transformational approaches.

The Trait and Behavioral Schools are the two "oldest." Antonakis et al. (2004) date the formal beginnings of the Trait school to the 1900s, and the Behavioral to the 1940s. They also represent a broader debate. What is a trait versus what is a behavior? A trait implies a characteristic that is stable and enduring as well as potentially innate. Behaviors on the other hand can be learned. This distinction is critical for both leadership and temporality research, as it cuts to the heart of leadership development. Can "leadership" be taught? Can polychronicity be taught? Bearing that controversy in mind can the introduction of polychronicity into leadership research be informative? Is one's preference for task engagement related to leadership effectiveness? Despite Bennis' quip that leaders do the right thing it is obvious that leadership involves a variety of activities, roles, and tasks - both of a functional as well as a social nature. What are the tasks involved (has past research investigating the behaviors of leaders adequately accounted for temporal variables and behaviors?) Can they be engaged in simultaneously? Which approach leads to more effective leadership? If one takes the broader view of polychronicity to include context/communication style, then the possible avenues of relevant inquiry are increased. This is especially true in light of Bennis and Nanus' (1985) contention that communication is crucial for effective leadership. How then does one's communication style influence leader effectiveness? Furthermore, is it a trait or a trainable behavior, and if the latter, then what is the best approach to facilitate its development?

**Contingency School of Leadership.** As the explanatory limitations of the behavioral approach were becoming evident, Fiedler (1967) proposed a contingency approach where aspects of the situation helped explain appropriate and effective leadership. Subsequent developments included House's (1971) path-goal theory as well as Kerr and Jermier's (1978) discussion of "substitutes for leadership." Antonakis et al. (2004) suggested that because it considers a broader range of contingent variables (e.g., culture) that the Contextual school may have absorbed the Contingent.

**Contextual School of Leadership.** As a more expansive "situational approach" Antonakis et al. noted that "from this perspective, contextual factors are seen to give rise to or inhibit certain leadership behaviors or their dispositional antecedents" (2004: 10). A prominent role is

played by culture, and relevant linkages to the Trait (“dispositional antecedents” - Antonakis et al., 2004: 10) and Behavioral (through its linkages with the Contingency school, which is to some extent an extension of and outgrowth of the Behavioral) schools are evident.

Research into the Behavioral approach to leadership eventually came to an effective end when it was realized that no single set of behaviors worked in all situations. The appropriate behaviors to enact were contingent on various demands and constraints of the situation within which the leader found him or herself. The Contingent approach focused on situational variables that could help explicate the proper timing of certain leadership behaviors. The Contextual school goes further and examines a wider range of potential “situational” variables. As such the integration of polychronicity seems appropriate for research in these areas, certainly to the extent that polychronicity is driven by culture and the Contextual school explicitly investigates the role of culture in leadership. How do the temporal demands of the situation affect leader effectiveness? Does the situation demand an approach focused on one task, or are there multiple activities and behaviors that must be engaged in and enacted simultaneously by the leader? Does the situation/context present the leader with deadlines and attendant time pressures, if so then this implies the potential utility of adopting a time tangible orientation, especially given that time and speed have come to be recognized as powerful competitive organizational tools (e.g., D’Aveni, 1994; Itoh, 1991; Stalk, 1988; Stalk & Hout, 1990; Vinton, 1992)?

Also, the consideration of context/communication style warrants attention. One needs to keep distinct the two meanings of “context” involved to limit possible confusion. Polychronicity research employs it in the sense of preferred communication style and the Contingency and Contextual schools employ it in the sense of situational or environmental factors impinging upon the leader. The nature of the leader’s communication style certainly appears to be implied in Fiedler’s work, as well as explicitly discussed in House’s path-goal theory. Given the importance that Hall assigned to both communication style and time use preference it may be beneficial to do so as well in leadership research.

**Relational School of Leadership.** This research stream explores the ideas of leader-member exchange (LMX) where the quality of the relationship between a leader and his or her follower(s) can predict germane outcomes relevant to leadership. To summarize this school of research, “LMX theory predicts that high-

quality relations generate more positive leader outcomes than do lower-quality relations” (Antonakis et al., 2004: 8). The study of the development of relationships should be enhanced by including Hall’s notion of context (i.e., communication style). Additionally, evidence has been presented that the fit between an individual’s time use preference and that of his or her department is predictive of organizational desired outcomes (e.g., Slocombe & Bluedorn; 1999). It may be worthwhile to ask what role does time use preference play in the development of the leader-member relationships that are the heart of LMX theory.

**Information-Processing School of Leadership.** Growing out of the seminal work of Lord, Foti, and DeVader (1984), “the focus of the work has been primarily on understanding why a leader is legitimized by virtue of the fact that his or her characteristics match the prototypical expectations that followers have of the leader” (Antonakis et al., 2004: 9). To the extent that expectations are shaped by culture there may be a role for the fruitful integration of polychronicity into this stream of research as well. Fundamentally, Hall believed that how a culture defines and uses time (e.g., how punctual one is in keeping appointments and meeting deadlines) was a valuable form of communication - communicating the shared meaning of what is important and valued. Time is socially constructed (Adam, 1995, 1998; Nowotny, 1992) and its meanings, interpretations and uses are basic forms of cultural information. Acknowledging and using people’s socially constructed perceptions of time in future research designs may inform research within the information-processing school. Additionally, the processing of information is a critical component of the notion of context as communication style. Explicitly studying high and low context communication styles (and their relationship with time use preference and time tangibility) should enrich this stream of research.

**New Leadership Neocharismatic Transformational Visionary School.** One of the most vital areas of recent leadership is what Lowe and Gardner (2000) labeled Neo-charismatic Approaches and Antonakis et al. (2004) called New Leadership (incorporating the neo-charismatic, transformational, and visionary approaches). This research stream has also encouraged renewed research in the trait approach motivated by the search for reliable and valid traits related to effective transformational leadership (e.g., charisma).

Despite Bennis’ quip effective transformational leaders must engage in multiple tasks and social interactions. The organizational world is just too complex



to allow otherwise. As a result of this reality does considering the leader's preferences for and skill at multiple task engagement explicate some aspect of effective transformational leadership that may have been heretofore confounded and hidden? Central to the transformational model of leadership is the creation and articulation of a compelling vision which implies a future oriented time horizon and the explicit recognition of time as a tangible entity. Obviously fundamental to the leader's effectiveness in this regard is his or her ability to communicate, which opens the door for the integration of context/communication style into possible research designs. Additionally, contingent notions of fit between the leader's communication style and the followers' preferred communication style(s) may also be beneficially investigated.

### DISCUSSION

Although only briefly explored above, the consideration of polychronicity, especially in its full richness and multi-dimensional nature as described by Edward T. Hall, has the potential to inform established leadership research. Given the vitality of research in both leadership and polychronicity, this is a path worth pursuing. Since polychronicity is a relatively new construct, exploring and testing it within the context of established leadership models should fruitfully enhance our understanding of polychronicity and its practical applications. For example, given the dynamic, multi-faceted character of organizations and the leadership role today, is it even possible to lead (and manage) in a monochronic fashion? On the other hand, are there drawbacks to a polychronic approach if it results in engagement in multiple activities, but the completion of none? Additionally, integration could be pursued in other less established areas of leadership research such as some mentioned by Lowe and Gardner (2000) (strategic leadership, political leadership, self-sacrificial leadership, political leadership), and others that exist such as high-impact leadership (Avolio & Luthans; 2005), authentic leadership (Bennis, 2004; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

In addition to the benefits that would accrue to management research (in the Fayolian sense which subsumes leadership) by explicitly incorporating polychronicity into leadership research, there may be potential benefits to be had by also incorporating other aspects of organizational temporality. These would include but are not limited to pace and tempo (Levine, 1997), entrainment (Ancona & Chong, 1996), time

horizons (e.g., short-term versus long-term), and past/present/future orientation (Bluedorn, 2000). This would echo recent calls for developing an integrative approach across the various dimensions of time and organizational temporality (Bluedorn & Standifer, 2004; Palmer, 2003).

Throughout his work Warren Bennis has called for greater attention to the development of good theory and research related to leadership, and the subsequent application of that knowledge to the development of leaders. "We must raise the search for new leadership to a national priority. We desperately need women and men who can take charge" (Bennis & Nanus, 1985: 228-229). In that spirit it is suggested that broadening the scope of leadership research to include temporal variables and constructs such as polychronicity may be beneficial to both research and practice.

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