

VALUES WORK IN LEADERSHIP: A GENERIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Generic leadership perspectives from which Christian Leadership can be approached include those of leadership traits, leadership styles, and New Leadership. Under the New Leadership concept, one can investigate the connections between Christian Leadership and, for example, Ethical Leadership, Spiritual Leadership, Servant Leadership, and Values-Oriented Leadership. This paper deals with certain theoretical problems of Value-Oriented Leadership, more precisely, issues of values representation and values work. Values work is normally defined by researchers from the perspective of specific processes of values protection and promotion. This study is based on previous theoretical research conducted by the author with the aim to provide an alternative interpretation of values work in a generic sense and to define it as a broad term within the phenomenon of leadership. The paper will continue with an examination of the topic "Leaders between role model and idol" from a generic values-work perspective.

Analysis in the previously conducted theoretical research is primarily based on relevant leadership theories. The research methods included argumentation and analytical framework development. Based on a generic values-work framework developed by the underlying theoretical research, this paper interprets leadership as values work and presents certain characteristics of the roles of leadership and idol from this aspect.

This paper highlights the importance to leadership of a values-related perspective in contrast to one related to power/influence. It also underlines a need for more research on values work as a generic leadership phenomenon. Based on the presented conceptual model of values work, conclusions will be drawn regarding Christian leaders as role models and idols.

Keywords: leadership, values-oriented leadership, values work

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INTRODUCTION

As early as in 1957, Selznick, in his classic study “Leadership in administration: a sociological interpretation”, portrayed the leader as “an expert in the promotion and protection of values”.¹ From certain sociological and philosophical aspects, especially from a religious, Christian perspective, it has always been an evident statement, as well as a spiritually experienced truth, that the substance of leadership cannot be deduced merely from leaders’ practices of executing power and exerting influence. According to this postulation and respective experiences, *beyond*, and logically, *before power* and *influence*, it is a search for and a representation of appropriate *values* that essentially constitute leadership. In this context, an important question is whether modern behavioral science leadership theory concepts and – more specifically – related definitions duly and substantially reflect the value-embeddedness of the field.

The main theoretical leadership perspectives from which Christian Leadership can be approached include those of leadership traits, leadership styles, and New Leadership. From these perspectives, values representation and values work are primarily linked to New Leadership. Under the New Leadership concept, interrelationship between Christian Leadership and, for example, Ethical Leadership, Spiritual Leadership, and Servant Leadership, – in connection with – Values-Oriented Leadership can be investigated. This paper targets certain theoretical problems of Values-Oriented Leadership, more specifically, issues of values representation^{2,3} and values work.^{4,5}

The aim of this paper is:

- to highlight certain concepts in the literature regarding the notions of values representation and values work in leadership, and to draw attention to a possible generic interpretation of these phenomena,
- to reflect on the topic “Leaders between role model and idol” from the examined theoretical perspective.

¹ Philip Selznick: *Leadership in administration: a sociological interpretation*. Harper & Row, New York, 1957, 28.

² Ronald H. Humphrey: *Effective Leadership. Theory, Cases and Applications*. Los Angeles, etc.: Sage. 2014, 6–7.

³ Selznick: *Leadership in administration*.

⁴ Joel Gehma – Linda K. Trevino – Raghu Garud: Values work: a process study of the emergence and performance of organizational values practices. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2013, 56(1), 84–112. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0628>

⁵ April L. Wright – Gemma Irving – Kalai Selvan Thevatas: Professional Values and Managerial Practices: Values work by nurses in the emergency department, *Organization Studies*, 2020-09-09. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0170840620950079>

The paper includes the following main topics:

1. The relevance of the problem of values representation in leadership theory
2. The notion and certain dimensions of values work – a generic perspective
3. Values work and Christian values
4. Results and summary

THE RELEVANCE OF THE PROBLEM OF VALUES REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP THEORY

Section 1, which deals with issues related to values representation in leadership theory, is divided into two parts:

- 1 Perspectives on defining leadership
- 2 Research on values representation and values work

Perspectives on defining leadership

The term *leadership* is commonly defined from the perspective of *power/influence*.⁶ In the evolution of thought on the concept of leadership, it has become clear that the perspective of *values* (e.g., representation of followers' and other stakeholders' values) could also be of key importance for conceptualizing the phenomenon of leadership.

When talking about various perspectives on defining leadership, it ought to be noted that leaders' power and influence and the representation of followers' values (among others) do not necessarily contradict one another. Rather, they work together in a functionally synergetic way. As suggested by Bakacsi⁷ with reference to Burns,⁸ the two leadership behaviors of will assertion and adaptation (e.g., accommodation of followers' values) do not mutually exclude one another but, instead, are interrelated.

In a monograph reviewing the literature on leadership, Yukl states that "most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people..."⁹

Nevertheless, there are authors who offer a dual approach by defining leadership from both the perspectives of both *power/influence* and *values*, for

⁶ János Fehér: An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions, *Journal of Management, Informatics and Human Resources*, 55. 4. (November) 2022, 322–332, <https://doi.org/10.2478/orga-2022-0021>

⁷ Gyula Bakacsi: *Szervezeti magatartás* [Organizational Behavior], Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1996.

⁸ James MacGregor Burns: *Leadership*, New York, Harper & Row, 1978, 18.

⁹ Gary Yukl: *Leadership in Organizations. Global Edition*, Edinburgh Gate, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2013, 18.

example: “giving purpose, meaning, and guidance”,¹⁰ “showing the way and helping or inducing others to pursue it... envisioning a desirable future, promoting a clear purpose or mission, supportive values and intelligent strategies...”¹¹

Humphrey¹² categorizes leadership definitions from the perspectives of “power” and “leaders as representatives”.

According to a **power perspective definition of leadership**, leaders command, control, direct, and influence followers to achieve group, organizational, or societal goals.

... From the **leaders as representatives perspective**, leaders are those who (1) best represent the values of their followers and (2) are better at solving their followers’ problems and achieving their goals. (Humphrey¹³; cited by Fehér [see, for example, Fehér, 2022,¹⁴ and Fehér, 2023.¹⁵])

Regarding the *leaders as representatives perspective*, Humphrey¹⁶ notes that – beyond commanding, controlling, directing, and influencing – leadership can be perceived as “articulating the values and desires of the group, [e.g.,] representing the organization’s core culture” and showing mastery “in carrying out the organization’s core mission.”

While Humphrey¹⁷ approaches the issue of values from the angle of how followers’ values are *represented* by the leader, Selznick,¹⁸ cited above, emphasizes that it is values *infusion* that is necessary for organizations to develop distinct institutional characters.¹⁹

With reference to Selznick’s pioneering thoughts, Hughes²⁰ notes the following some decades later:

¹⁰ Robert J. House – Ram M. Aditya: The social scientific study of leadership: Quo Vadis? *Journal of Management*, 1997, 23, 409–473. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-2063\(97\)90037-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-2063(97)90037-4), 444–445.

¹¹ Roger Gill: *Theory and Practice of Leadership*, London, Sage Publications Ltd., 2011, 9.

¹² Ronald H. Humphrey: *Effective Leadership. Theory, Cases and Applications*, Los Angeles, etc.: Sage, 2014, 6–7.

¹³ Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7.

¹⁴ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

¹⁵ János Fehér: *Leadership – A Values-work Perspective*, Akadémiai Kiadó (Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Budapest, 2023. <https://mersz.hu/feher-leadership-a-values-work-perspective/>

¹⁶ Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Selznick: *Leadership in administration*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mark Hughes: *The Leadership of Organizational Changes*, New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2016.

“Selznick, as a professor of sociology ... regarded leaders as primarily experts in the promotion and protection of values, yet this emphasis was lost in the transition into management and organization studies leadership narratives.”

In the search for further theoretical roots of values-related leadership conceptualizations, one can refer, for instance, to Leadership-follower theory. In this theory, leadership is an exchange between “meaning making” offered by the leader and status recognition and idiosyncrasy credit offered by the followers.²¹ To refer to some more recent leadership approaches, the theoretical core of certain New Leadership streams, such as Transformational, Spiritual, Ethical and Servant Leadership, is based on specific or generic values. For example, a central idea of Transformational leadership theory is that “Leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation”.²² The values-related substance of leadership is also mirrored by Steward Leadership theory.²³ April et al.’s stewardship framework involves, among others, dimensions of personal mastery, personal vision, shared vision, mentoring, risk-taking/experimenting, and vulnerability and maturity.²⁴ From these dimensions, for instance, the dimension of mentoring – as related to community building – is introduced by April et al. as follows:

The goal of mentoring is to nurture environments wherein protégés may develop more completely and commit to a set of values that serve the greater good. The focus, therefore, is on community building. The hypothesis here is that mentoring is positively correlated to community building because we are able to impact stages of progression by attending to the needs and potential of others.²⁵

As shown by illustrations from key literature sources, a *values-centered* – as opposed to a dominant, *power/influence-related* – perspective can be seen as an essential historical and contemporary alternative from which to approach and conceptualize leadership. According to certain authors, values-related activities may even be seen as a definitive characteristic²⁶ or primary role of leaders.²⁷

²¹ Edwin P. Hollander: Conformity, status, and idiosyncrasy credit, *Psychological Review*, 1958, 65, 117–127. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0042501>

²² Burns: *Leadership*, 18.

²³ Kurt A. April – Julia Kukard – Kai Peters: *Steward Leadership. A Maturational Perspective*. Cape Town, UCT Press, 2013.

²⁴ April–Kukard–Peters: *Steward Leadership*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ E.g. Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7.

²⁷ Selznick: *Leadership in administration*.

Research on values representation and values work

Leaders' personal values and the process of the representation of leaders' and stakeholders' values are currently investigated in different societal and organizational segments from diverse aspects.

One of the reasons for the marked increase in research on the representation and formation of leaders' and followers' values, as well as on culture building in organizations, was the impact of the 2019–2021 pandemic. To meet challenges in the organizational environment, Clifton and Harter, in their book *Culture Shock*, based on their Gallup research, call for a need for building organizational cultures of caring.²⁸ They also claim that the key way to build a caring culture is to “build trust in leadership by making decisions that reflect the [...] organizations' values.”²⁹

As for an example of research on leaders' personal values, the impact of values on opinion leadership was investigated recently by Lührmann et al. in German private and public corporations. The authors found that specific personal values predicted opinion leadership and positive behavioral effects between managers and employees.³⁰

To quote an example from research on cultural values, Cheng Yong Tan conducted a meta-analysis to study how values shaped school leadership in Singapore. Research has found a connection between values and leadership style and has shown that the “confluence of different cultural values resulted in school leaders adopting a meta-strategic leadership perspective.”³¹

An example of practical work on values and culture is provided by Tye & Dent, authors of the book *Building a Culture of Ownership in Healthcare*. They identify a need for and offer instruments to construct an “Invisible Architecture” for organizations.³² In their interpretation, Invisible Architecture is built from core values, organizational culture, and workplace attitude.³³ They state that “financial growth is an outcome that is a result of working on values and culture” and show how organizational culture and business success indicators

²⁸ Jim Clifton – Jim Harter: *Culture Shock: An unstoppable force is changing how we work and live. Gallup's solution to the biggest leadership issue of our time*. Simon and Schuster, 2023. 85.

²⁹ Clifton–Harter: *Culture Shock*, 86.

³⁰ Julia Lührmann – Helena Stehle – Volker Gehrau – Ulrike Röttger: Personal Values and Their Impact on the Opinion Leadership of Managers and Employees in Internal Communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 2025, 37:1-2, 151–172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2024.2409652>

³¹ Cheng Yong Tan: Influence of Cultural Values on Singapore School Leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. 2022, Volume 52, Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211073414>

³² Joe Tye – Bob Dent: *Building a Culture of Ownership in Healthcare – The Invisible Architecture of Core Values, Attitude, and Self-Empowerment*. Sigma Theta Tau, 2024. 10.

³³ Tye–Dent: *Building a Culture of Ownership in Healthcare*, 11.

are positively related by using examples of hospitals operating as competitors in the same service market.³⁴

Through an analysis of further sources, it may be concluded that a growing interest can be found in defining and investigating leadership from a values-related perspective. However, it may be noted, too, that in accordance with what Yukl (op. cit.³⁵) suggests, the power/influence perspective still seems to dominate.

Turning to the key term investigated in this paper, *values work* (see, for example, Gehman et al.,³⁶ Wright et al.,³⁷ Larson,³⁸ Chan & Hedden³⁹), it is normally defined by values-oriented research streams as a *specific process* of values representation and transfer (Lašáková et al. cited by Fehér, 2022⁴⁰). Paradoxically, a gap can be seen in *generic* interpretations of the significance and descriptions of *overall* characteristics of values work.⁴¹

As this study aims to draw attention to a generic interpretation of values work, it uses a conceptual framework of the author's research on generic values-work dimensions⁴² for this purpose.

THE NOTION AND CERTAIN DIMENSIONS OF VALUES WORK – A GENERIC PERSPECTIVE

In line with Humphrey's "leaders as representatives" perspective⁴³ and especially with the *values-representation* sub-perspective, a *broad* interpretation of values work, namely "*Leadership as Values Work, LaVW*" was proposed by Fehér (2022)⁴⁴ as a way to identify leaders' primary role.

In the suggested interpretation of Leadership as Values Work (LaVW), leaders' primary role is meant to be:

³⁴ Ibid., 13, 24.

³⁵ Yukl: *Leadership in Organizations*, 18.

³⁶ Gehman–Trevino–Garud: *Values work*, 84–112.

³⁷ Wright–Irving–Thevatas: *Professional Values and Managerialist Practices*

³⁸ Jeffrey D. Larson: *Maintaining Values Through Performance in Daily Organizational Work*. The University of Arizona ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2024. 20–22.

³⁹ Curtis K. Chan – Luke N. Hedden: The Role of Discernment and Modulation in Enacting Occupational Values: How Career Advising Professionals Navigate Tensions with Clients. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2023, 66, 276–305, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1014>

⁴⁰ Anna Lašáková – Lubica Bajžíková – Ivana Blahunková: Values oriented leadership – Conceptualization and preliminary results in Slovakia, 2019, cited by Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

⁴¹ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7.

⁴⁴ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

Conceptualizing and making personal strategic choices about values and acting as a mover within the dynamic (organizational) processes of (1) identifying/constructing, further elaborating, sharing values, and (2) using them as guiding principles in solving problems and achieving goals.⁴⁵

As for the sectorial relevance of the *leaders as representatives* (LaR) perspective and the notion of Leadership as Values Work (LaVW), it is suggested that LaR and LaVW concern leadership as a generic phenomenon. Their relevance is therefore not restricted to problems of leading in a societal sense, e.g., public organizations, or social-political movements.⁴⁶

For characterizing Leadership as Values Work (LaVW) in the author's theoretical research cited here, the following dimensions were suggested:⁴⁷

1. Content characteristics of values.

Values can be classified by their content, for example, as religion-based/secular; ethically related/ethically non- or non-directly related (e.g., some types of functional/pragmatic values); other types of values.

2. Generality of values.⁴⁸

For classification by level of generality, universal, regional, national cultural, subcultural, local, and other levels (as, for example, organizational, group, and individual levels) can be proposed.

3. Multiplicity and diversity.

For understanding leadership as values work, an important dimension can be the multiplicity (high/low) and diversity (high/low) of the values to be interpreted and promoted/resisted by the leader. High multiplicity and diversity of values means multiple values of a broad (or indefinite) scope/array (for example: ethical values in a generic sense), whereas low multiplicity and diversity means fewer values of a narrow, special values segment (for example: values related to certain specific ethical, spiritual or pragmatic contexts).⁴⁹

4. Origin of values to be represented.

From an organizational perspective, by their origin, values may be imported or intra-organizationally generated.

5. Time of origin of values – historical, emerging, currently defined.

Also, from an organizational perspective, by time of origin, values may be historical, emerging or currently defined.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ János Fehér: Certain aspects of the “leaders as representatives” leadership perspective. *Glossa Iuridica*, 2018. V. 3-4., 173–185.

⁴⁷ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

6. Elements of values work.

For working definitions for different, interrelated values-work elements, the following are suggested. *Inner (intra-personal) values work* is suggested to mean an intra-personal work of the leader on the conceptualization, harmonization, and operationalization of his/her own, owners'/governors', and other stakeholders' and generic social values.⁵⁰ *Fundamental values work* is proposed to be the following: moving / participating in the moving of dynamic group / organizational processes of identifying / constructing, further elaborating, and sharing values, whereas *applied values work* can be interpreted as using values as guiding principles in solving problems and achieving goals.^{51,52}

7. Consistency between leaders' and followers' values.

Depending on the level of value-consistency between leader and followers (High/Low), the leader's role options can be the following: high consistency – a *representation of followers' values*; low consistency – an *infusion* of alternative values (for *values infusion* see Hollander, 1958).⁵³

8. Differences in role distributions / levels of involvement between leaders and followers and other stakeholders in identifying and cultivating values (e.g., promoting, transmitting or confronting values or infusing alternative values).⁵⁴

Role distributions / levels of involvement between leaders and followers and other stakeholders in identifying and cultivating values may, for example, show the following patterns: leader's initiatives and involvement; followers' or other parties' dominance in values work; or multiple initiatives and involvements.⁵⁵

9. Authenticity of the leader's behavior in representing values (high/low).⁵⁶

10. Credibility implications of the values work (positive/negative).⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7.

⁵³ Hollander: *Conformity, status, and idiosyncrasy credit*, 117–127.

⁵⁴ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ William L. Gardner et al.: "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 2005, 16, 343–372. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.003>

⁵⁷ James M. Kouzes – Barry Z. Posner: *Credibility. How leaders gain and lose it. Why people demand it*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

VALUES WORK AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

As shown in Section 1, certain authors of classical sources and, recently, of new works on leadership, have placed great emphasis on the topics of representation of values and culture building in leadership. As also discussed, in the development of this process, leadership has increasingly been articulated as values work, in the broad sense of the term.

Section 2 proposed an interpretation of *leadership as values work* and presented certain generic values-work dimensions,⁵⁸ including *contents of values* represented, *elements of values-work*, and other characteristics.

Regarding the *contents* of values, New Leadership and related conceptual currents of thought suggest that non-traditional means of (leadership) influence are centered around positive ethical and functional values, e.g., morality, responsibility, stewardship, service, care, and community building. It may be noted that many – if not all – of the leadership values with ethical implications reflected on by New Leadership can be traced back to the Christian values system and may be consciously followed/used by Christian leaders.

Regarding values-work in secular organizations through different – *intra-personal, fundamental and applied*⁵⁹ – *values-work elements*, it can be assumed that the core Christian values of Christian confession may normally be of more intensive and direct use for *inner (intra-personal)* values work, while the Christian values derived from belief may be of direct use both for *intra-personal* and other (*fundamental* and *applied*) values work of Christian leaders.

Further, the aforementioned generic values-work dimensions include, among others, *authenticity* and *credibility*. Leaders may also turn to the Christian system of values for guidance on how to be authentic⁶⁰ in the representation of targeted positive values, and on how to obtain credibility⁶¹ among their followers.

It can be concluded that executing spiritually well-based, ethical, and functional values work offers a solid foundation for leaders in becoming role models and may help preserve them from the dangers of idolization.

Values work can be helpful for leaders and followers, in a generic sense, through creating a less subjective, more de-personalized framework for (organizational) interactions and the leader–follower relationship. Concretely, values work can place values like honesty, authenticity, openness, recognizing the “vulnerability” of leaders (acknowledging that leaders are not infallible) center stage, making followers feel interdependence, ownership and responsibility and may help them avoid degenerative idolism.

⁵⁸ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 326–328.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Gardner et al.: “Can you see the real me?”, 343–372.

⁶¹ Kouzes–Posner: *Credibility*.

RESULTS AND SUMMARY

Based on a review of certain key sources in the evolution of leadership thought, and, especially, value-oriented leadership, this paper highlighted the importance of *values representation for interpreting and defining leadership* (for example, Selznick,⁶² April et al.,⁶³ Humphrey,⁶⁴ Clifton and Harter,⁶⁵ Tye and Dent⁶⁶), in contrast to the *power/influence* perspective.⁶⁷ It was stated that even until recently, the literature overemphasized the role of the power/influence perspective of leadership.

This paper suggested a broad interpretation of the notions *values representation* and *values work* for the identification of the primary role of leaders. For presenting leadership from a generic perspective of values work, an outline of certain generic values-work dimensions was proposed.^{68,69,70,71}

It was concluded that under the *leadership as a values work* paradigm, the essence of leadership lies firstly in the quality of the values identified; followed/resisted; in case of acceptance/consent represented, or else infused authentically; guarded; and further developed for use in a dynamic process of interactions between leaders and followers.

It was stated that the Christian values system supports leaders' values work by offering guidance, especially, for voting for *spiritually right* values, deepening *intra-personal* work on values, representing values *consciously, explicitly* and *authentically*⁷² and obtaining *credibility*⁷³ among followers.

It was suggested that executing a spiritually well-based, ethical and functional values work would offer a solid foundation for leaders to become role models and could help prevent them from succumbing to the dangers of idolization.

⁶² Selznick: *Leadership in administration*.

⁶³ April-Kukard-Peters: *Steward Leadership*.

⁶⁴ Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7.

⁶⁵ Clifton-Harter: *Culture Shock*, 86.

⁶⁶ Tye-Dent: *Building a Culture of Ownership in Healthcare*, 13.

⁶⁷ Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7, as referred to by Fehér. *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332.

⁶⁸ Fehér: *An outline of certain generic values-work dimensions*, 322–332, with reference to Hollander: *Conformity, status, and idiosyncrasy credit*, 117–127.

⁶⁹ Gardner et al.: "Can you see the real me?", 343–372.

⁷⁰ Kouzes-Posner: *Credibility*.

⁷¹ Humphrey: *Effective Leadership*, 6–7.

⁷² Gardner et al.: "Can you see the real me?", 343–372.

⁷³ Kouzes-Posner: *Credibility*.

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