

The opponent process theory of leadership succession

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Abstract

Groups are increasingly conceptualized as self-regulating, adaptive social systems, where time and history play central explanatory roles. Despite this, concepts related to opponent processes, which are central to theories of self-regulation, have been absent from discussions of leadership of groups. In this paper, we introduce the opponent process theory of leadership succession, and argue that the impact of leadership on current outcomes can be fully appreciated only by complementing the understanding of the current leader's behaviors and style with the behaviors and styles of his or her predecessor. We outline both the process and content of opponent processes highlighting their potential to explain both adaptive and maladaptive behavior in groups.

Keywords

Decision-making, diversity & relational demography, careers, fit, groups/teams, job withdrawal (turnover, absenteeism, lateness), leadership, organizational change, power, selection & assessment/training & development

In the last two decades, many organizations have restructured their workforce around work groups (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999), and this has led to a corresponding increase in applied research on group behavior. Recent research on groups has increasingly conceptualized these types of social collectives in adaptive, self-regulatory

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terms where issues related to time and temporal sequences are central to prediction and understanding (McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000). These recent approaches have focused on time expressed as group tenure (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002), the group's stage of development (Kozlowski, Gully, Nason, & Smith, 1999), as well as the group's phase within specific goal–performance–feedback cycles (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). Yet despite the fact that there have been radical changes in how scholars have conceptualized groups and organizations based upon temporal dynamics, this has not translated into changes in how researchers have conceptualized the *leadership* of groups and organizations.

For example, specific theories such as structural adaptation theory (Hollenbeck, Ellis, Humphrey, Garza, & Ilgen, 2011) have been constructed around empirical findings that document the limitations of trying to predict group behavior from the state of current task structure, reward structure, or decision-making structure, without a full consideration of past task structure, reward structure, or decision-making structure. This research consistently points to asymmetries (i.e., dissimilar patterns of relationships) in group dynamics that make predictions based strictly on current configurations untenable. Indeed, the notion that “history matters” in groups is now so well established, that a recent review in the *Annual Review of Psychology* called for a moratorium on the use of the traditional input–process–outcome framework specifically because of its inability to address temporal and cyclical aspects of group dynamics (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005).

To the extent that leaders have disproportional influence with respect to task design, reward systems, and other critical aspects of the group, conceptualizing groups as adaptive self-regulatory systems has important implications for leaders. Specifically, this implies that the effect of any one general leadership style or specific leadership behavior cannot be

predicted without a consideration of the leadership style that preceded it (Ritter & Lord, 2007), and thus, the proposition that “history matters” should be as relevant to leaders of groups, as it is to groups in general.

Theories of leadership have a long history of recognizing contingencies, and the notion that any one style or behavior may have differential effects due to the nature of the task or followers is at the core of many contemporary theories (Vroom & Jago, 2007). However, contingencies associated with how the group's current leader compares and contrasts with the group's past leader have not been at the forefront of past theory and research. As Avolio (2007, p. 26) recently noted,

Leadership theory and research has reached a point in its development at which it needs to move to the next level of integration—considering the dynamic interplay between leaders and followers, taking into account the prior, current, and emerging context—for continued progress to be made in advancing both the science and practice of leadership.

The role of leadership history is likely to be particularly salient when the group is confronting a change in leaders. Leadership succession focuses attention on leadership and increases the saliency of the virtues and liabilities associated with the former leader, as well as aspirations for the new leader (Ballinger, Lehman, & Schoorman, 2010). Most group members are dependent on the leader, and thus, the perception that leadership is potentially “up for grabs” could spark group conflict, especially in the face of disparate group member values, beliefs, or backgrounds (Shaw et al., 2011). Failing to recognize the impact of the past leader on the current leader means that much of what we generally believe to be true regarding the relationships between leadership styles and behaviors, on the one hand, and group outcomes on the other, may be contingent upon historical factors that are not being addressed

in current theories. This restricts the amount of variance in outcomes that can be attributed to leaders, and promotes the notion that leaders are irrelevant (Pfeffer, 1977) or that there are many substitutes for leadership that negate its value (Ullrich, van Dick, & Christ, 2009).

The purpose of this manuscript is to develop a formal theory of leadership succession in groups that addresses both the process and content of the dynamics that occur in the face of an anticipated change in leadership. At the core of this theory is the notion of opponent processes, and how a group's history with past leaders shapes their perceptions and aspirations for future leaders. This theory describes several theses and antitheses that create cyclical responses to paradoxical tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011), using an opponent process metaphor for describing how this content plays out in the dynamic context of leadership successions. The nature of the process implies that leadership succession has the potential to convert latent conflict about what leadership styles are most appropriate, into manifest conflict, where the disagreements are aired publically and debated (Glynn, 2000) with the aim of influencing the outcomes of succession.

The degree to which these opponent processes are adaptive or dysfunctional is contingent upon both external competitive pressures faced by the group, as well as internal political pressures. By external pressures, we mean factors outside the group such as product markets, labor markets, government regulators, or technological developments that require changes in leadership style to maintain alignment with the environment. When opponent processes are driven by these forces, they are likely to lead to adaptive responses that promote organizational effectiveness. In contrast, by internal political pressures, we mean factors inside the group that are driven by power acquisition motives of the leader's peers, subordinates, or others intent on changing the status quo in order to improve their own positions (Kacmer, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011). This would also include any

"change for the sake of change" moves that a successor might make simply to reinforce his or her new power in the wake of a succession. Increasing our appreciation of the dynamic aspects of leadership succession has important theoretical implications for understanding the concept of leadership, but also applied implications related to leader selection, leadership development, leadership usurpation, and succession planning.

The mechanics of opponent processes: Thesis, antithesis, synthesis, and negation

Central elements in opponent process theorizing

Themes related to opponent processes are highly apparent in social and political philosophy. Hegel's notion of the dialectical nature of history was the first formal treatment of the mechanics opponent processes, where he stressed the notions of *thesis* (i.e., an idea that is currently accepted as truth) and *antithesis* (an idea that stands in opposition to the thesis). In Hegel's framework, all knowledge is relative, and hence a true understanding of a thesis can only be obtained by an appreciation of contrasting ideas (Beiser, 1993) that serve as "foils" for the thesis. Thus, for many common and recurrent questions or problems dealing with managing groups, the answers or solutions are often paired up in sets of mutually exclusive alternatives. Over time, the imperfections of any one thesis can be increasingly documented and discussed, and some adherents for change begin to rally around the antithesis (Westphal, 1998).

Over even more time, the forces for stability and change may coalesce around the opposing alternatives, and a period of "latent conflict" ensues. Latent conflict means that one or more individuals are aware of the problems associated with the current leadership style, and even though they may be attracted to the alternative style, this is not publically debated. The conflict

remains latent because the risk versus reward ratio for publically criticizing the style of a potentially powerful leader who is already in place does not promote this type of personal disclosure. Criticism of the style of the leader in place might be perceived as disloyal or dangerous, and unlikely to yield change. Although this latent conflict may surface periodically, for the most part, it lies dormant because the risk is greater than the likely reward for proponents of change.

Triggers of leadership succession

At certain points in the group's history, however, there may be perceived opportunities for leadership succession. There are many different types of triggers. For example, with respect to the trigger itself, some leadership positions come with fixed terms that are either formally in place or are part of well-established norms. In this case, the trigger can be well anticipated and the discussion can proceed quite straightforwardly. Discussions move in a predictable way from latent conflict to manifest conflict, as would-be successors try to vie for some regularly scheduled leadership succession opportunity. The anticipated nature of this event may be preceded by politicking on the part of the would-be successors who try to define their own leadership style by making reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the leader currently in place. In any event, the process in this case is relatively orderly and most members of the group have clear expectations and perhaps even a script in mind for how this plays out.

In other cases, the trigger may be a cumulative process of small problems and complaints that, over time, shape the conversation of future needs. In this case, the period of latent conflict may be longer and less public, because no clear opportunity for succession is on the foreseeable horizon. Discussions of succession in this instance may not be considered normatively appropriate or as legitimate as might be the case if there was a fixed term with an

obvious window for discussion. Under these conditions, the alternatives to the thesis may be percolating under the surface for a long time, until someone (perhaps a would-be successor) eventually says something that everyone else is thinking.

These kinds of discussions may not have a true sense of urgency, however, until some precipitating event, such as a major group failure, triggers a shift from latent conflict to manifest conflict (Rudolf & Reppenning, 2002). A performance failure in complex and dynamic systems is often hard to diagnose, and one especially salient target for attribution in this context is the leader (Sterman, 2001). If the performance failure can be attributed to a perceptually salient individual such as a leader (rather than some low-level scapegoat) this legitimates the antithesis. This could lead to a leadership succession that is closer to a coup, and this may be the opposite of the scripted, orderly succession process that results from a regularly scheduled leadership succession opportunity (the end of a term). The manifest conflict resulting from this process may be more intense and less predictable relative to what would result from a regularly scheduled event. Moreover, the uncertainty associated with this kind of succession may even prompt the group to institutionalize a fixed term model to avoid this kind of uncertainty in the future.

Controlling authorities for leadership succession

In addition to the nature of the trigger itself, the controlling authority with responsibility for pulling the trigger also has to be considered. In the case of a hierarchical, command-and-control style organization, this responsibility is held by some higher level leader who may be able to unilaterally create or prevent a succession opportunity. In this case, the stage of latent conflict within the group may be long and less public, as long as it is clear that the leader in place has the support of upper level leaders.

In particular, if the leader of the group serves as a buffer between upper level leaders and lower group members, a succession opportunity may not materialize even if there are major complaints and problems perceived by the group members. Group members in this case may be tempted to violate the chain of command by going “over the head” of their direct leader, but this is a move that entails a great deal of risk. Those that live by the chain of command do not like to see it threatened without a very good reason, and hence, the evidence for the antitheses in this case would have to be quite strong before such a tactic would even be considered (Huy, 2001). In general, when the trigger for a succession is held by upper level leaders, the stage of latent conflict could be very long, and nothing short of long bouts of ineffectiveness or a single major precipitating event may be enough to trigger a succession.

In contrast, in self-managing teams, the group as a whole may have the power to pull the trigger themselves, and this can create a context where the shift from latent conflict to manifest conflict happens quickly and publicly. Leadership succession opportunities in self-managing groups are more fluid and conceptions of shared leadership may mean that certain leadership responsibilities simply shift from one person to another, creating “sub-successions” and redesigned leadership roles (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). The fluid nature of this process can be an effective way for the group to stay adaptive, but at the same time, this fluidity runs the risk of the group losing focus and efficiency. In particular, if there are strong subgroups within the overall group that cling to alternative theses, the lack of structure may create the opportunity for a culture of manifest conflict that prevents the group from learning and moving forward (Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010). Moreover, the uncertainty associated with this kind of repeated succession may even prompt the group to institutionalize a more hierarchical model of succession that “saves them from themselves.”

In general, in terms of sources of the antithesis, advocates for the antithesis can come from many different places, including (a) a new higher level leader who demands change from lower level leaders, (b) a selection committee generating criteria for screening applicants for a leadership opening, (c) an interpersonal peer-rival trying to undermine the current leader (d) an ambitious subordinate who wants to ascend to a leadership position (e) a group of unhappy subordinates with consensus on a specific grievance, (f) an outside consultant. In addition, there is an opportunity to form political coalitions composed from different sources, and the diversity and range associated with these coalitions may make them particularly powerful (a group of dissatisfied employees who team up with a peer-rival to work with a new higher level leader to bring about change).

Leadership succession as negation or synthesis

In addition to the nature of the trigger and the controlling authority for determining succession, the last component of opponent processes is whether the instantiation of these processes result in “negation” or “synthesis.” This is a critical issue because “negation,” that is, simply reverting from the thesis to the antithesis, may create a churning process that merely swaps one set of problems for an alternative set of problems. Churning does not really move the group forward, but tends to move the group from side to side, balkanizing potential subgroups. In contrast, a true “synthesis” works to create a compromise solution that embodies components of both the thesis and antithesis may promote adaptive growth.

In particular, syntheses that take the best elements of the thesis and antithesis, while perhaps avoiding the pitfalls of each, may result in negotiated settlements that appease the proponents of each side of the “thesis–antithesis” debate. Of course, like building “half a bridge,” syntheses that reflect simple “split the

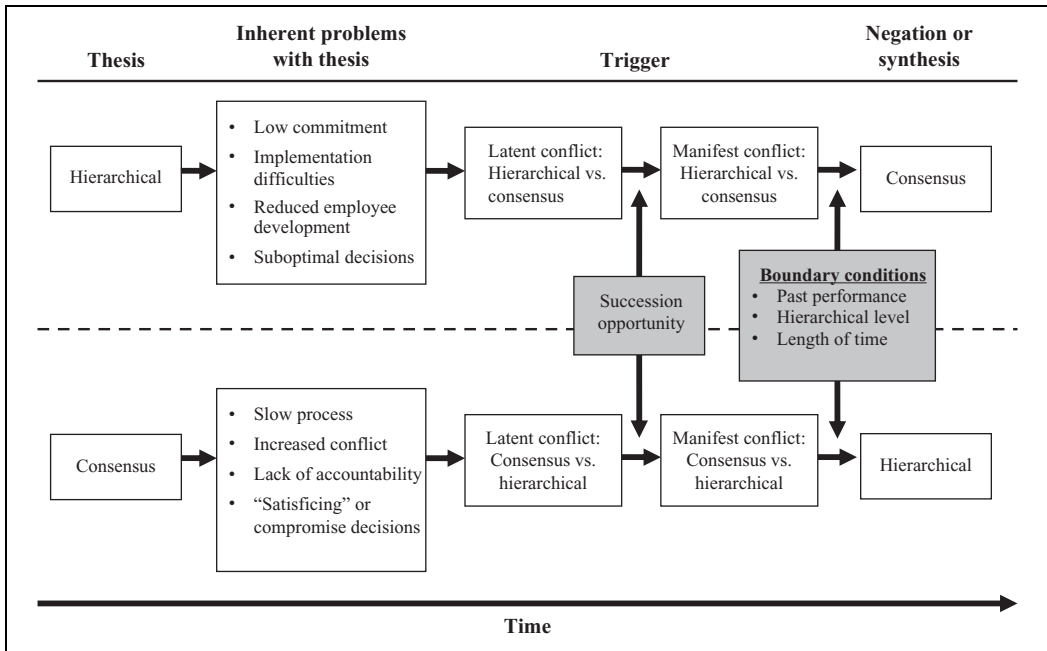


Figure 1. The opponent process of collective decision-making.

difference” or “turn-taking” norms may not promote adaptive growth either. In the end, the fit of the “solution” for the “problem” at that moment of time, will ultimately determine group effectiveness and adaptability.

An illustration of opponent processes: Group decision-making

In order to illustrate this process more concretely, one could imagine a hypothetical team leader’s approach to group decision-making, depicted in Figure 1. Imagine that the current leader believes in low authority differentiation in groups, and thus feels that the best method for arriving at group decisions is to achieve consensus (the original thesis, shown at the bottom of Figure 1). A full appreciation of what it means to achieve consensus, however, can only be known by contrasting this method with an autocratic or hierarchical decision (the antithesis of a consensus decision, depicted at the top

of Figure 1). For example, the slow speed associated with consensus processes that are low in authority differentiation, as well as the ability of a single, perhaps unreasonable member, to dominate the process (Hollenbeck, Beersma & Schouten, 2012), draws some individuals to the lure of the antithesis (autocratic decision-making). As a result, this also draws them to leaders who personify a style that exemplifies higher authority differentiation.

According to a theory of opponent processes, once the current leader selects any one style, the best of these alternative styles then becomes an antithesis that stands in contrast to the thesis. Any imperfection in the current thesis becomes indirect evidence for the validity of the antithesis. The opportunity for leadership succession, regardless of how it comes about or who is the controlling authority, alters the risk versus reward ratio, and serves as a signal to challenge (or at least, rethink the status quo). At this moment, latent conflict transforms

into more manifest conflict, where the potential for a public debate of the virtues and liabilities of alternative leadership styles is more likely. Once this public debate starts, the thesis may start out from a position of weakness because as Repenning and Sterman (2001, p. 81) note “nobody ever gets credit for fixing problems that never happened.” That is, the problems solved by the thesis (such as the difficulty associated with implementing decisions that were not generated via a consensus-building process) may have never materialized or been forgotten. In contrast, the problems caused by this solution (e.g., slow decision-making and the ability of a single unreasonable member to derail decisions that demand consensus) are being experienced in a very real and salient way.

At the same time, because leadership is essentially “up for grabs,” this also increases the likelihood that change efforts on the part of those advocating the antithesis may be rewarded. Thus, during a succession episode, a period of conceptual conflict ensues, and the group may overthrow the thesis in favor of the antithesis, or reach some compromise synthesis of the two ideas. This new synthesis, once achieved, becomes the new thesis and propagates the generation of a new antithesis, and another round of ideational conflict.

Returning to our example, when it becomes clear that the predecessor’s time as the leader is ending, the group may reject the consensus decision-making methods that were employed by him/her and embrace a new leader who advocates hierarchical decision-making as a means of group decision-making. Over time, the same group may discover that this method has its own liabilities in terms of reduced commitment to decisions, implementation problems, reduced employee development, and suboptimal decision-making outcomes attributed to information-processing limitations associated with a single individual.

This might prompt another round of ideational conflict, but rather than just negating one practice in favor of another, some synthesis

alternative might be developed, such as voting. Leaders who embrace voting as a solution to decision-making in the face of disagreement become attractive successors. Still, over time, the group learns that voting often fails to protect minorities, fails to generate constructive debate once voting blocks are established, and results in problems with implementation among those who lost out in the voting process (Hollenbeck et al., 2012). As these problems become more salient, the search for a new antithesis begins and the process repeats. This may lead to some new untried synthesis (e.g., two-thirds majority rule) or a previously rejected alternative (consensus or autocratic decision-making). Leaders that personify these alternative styles might then be highly attractive, and this may even lead to historical revisionism or embellishment of the attractiveness of past leaders, who were not perceived as *that* attractive when they were actually in place.

Opponent processes: Adaptive growth versus cyclical churning

As we have seen, a theory of opponent processes proposes that the adoption of any idea ultimately brings about the very processes that will eventually replace that idea with its opposite form (or a compromise that contains many aspects of the opposite form)—a process labeled *negation*. This reflects an explicit awareness of the predictable problems that are generated by any one specific solution, and the larger realization that “the problem you solve today creates the opportunity to solve the next problem that your last solution created” (Pascale, 1990, p. 50).

In an opponent process framework, history is central to understanding the group’s future over and above any consideration of current contingencies. Indeed, if one goes back to Hegel, he proposes that all of social history can be understood in terms of this dialectic between opposing ideas, and thus conflict is a natural state of social order (Westphal, 1998). Hegel suggested that this conflict over ideas was

normatively adaptive, and that through an evolutionary process, ideas would improve over time and result in growth and improvement. Critics of Hegel argued there is no logical reason to presume any such normative ideational “survival of the fittest,” process. Instead, they argued that this process was just a *descriptive rhetoric* that legitimated the ambitions of the nonruling elite to overturn status quo power arrangements, leading to cyclical churning back and forth from alternative ideas (Beiser, 1993). Thus, the existence of both *external competitive* drivers and *internal political* drivers of ideational conflict has long been recognized, and lies at the heart of the debate as to whether this dialectical process is adaptive over time or just represents a cyclical churning through alternative ideas, devoid of any real progress.

A process driven by the need to respond to external competitive pressures is more likely to be adaptive relative to one driven by internal political “change for the sake of change” pressures. For example, if the slow nature of the consensus-building process had led the group to miss many critical time-sensitive opportunities, then the shift to a leader who employs voting methods could be adaptive. In contrast, if the group was not truly confronting time-sensitive pressures, but internal coalitions were overemphasizing the liabilities associated with a consensus-building style as a pretext for a change in leadership, then the process might be less adaptive. If a new leader, in order to legitimate and emphasize his or her new authority, simply chooses an alternative style to prove politically that “there is a new sheriff in town,” then the process is much more likely to be cyclical and maladaptive than adaptive. This act of opposition simply exchanges one set of problems for an alternative set of problems that may actually be worse than those currently being experienced. It might also trade a set of well-known problems for which informal “workarounds” have been developed for a set of new problems that have no such workarounds in place. Thus, changes that are primarily driven

by internal political pressures are more likely to “churn” the system through a series of “change for the sake of change” episodes that drain energy, obscure focus, promote cynicism, and ultimately become maladaptive.

Opponent processes theory of team leadership: The seven core propositions

Although theorizing along the lines of opponent processes has a long history in both science and philosophy, the notion of opponent processes has played almost no role in theorizing in the organizational sciences or the area of leadership, even though the management literature is littered with theses, antitheses, and syntheses, as well as themes related to self-regulation and evolutionary dynamics (van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). Indeed, theories rooted in the notion of managing or balancing one paradox or another are increasingly replacing simpler contingency theories throughout the applied social sciences (Smith & Lewis, 2011) in a way that has not materialized in the field of leadership.

Thus, even though groups are increasingly being conceptualized in self-regulatory terms, this has not translated into conceptions of leadership of groups that reflect how the instantiation of one leadership style that moves the group in one direction, ultimately creates pressures to adopt an alternative style or opponent process that would naturally move the group in a different direction. This creates a need for formal theorizing that attempts to more effectively leverage self-regulation conceptualizations that focus on theses, antitheses, negation, steady states, and dual countervailing processes. The opponent process theory of leadership succession (OPT) as described here represents such an effort.

At the core of this theory lies (a) the dialectical nature of opponent processes, (b) the generic problems in leadership contexts that each opponent process *eliminates*, (c) the generic problems in leadership contexts that each

opponent process *creates*, (d) the internal political and external competitive pressures that trigger changes in alternative directions, and (e) the trigger represented by the leadership succession opportunity that, because the status quo is momentarily disrupted, transforms latent conflict into more manifest conflict. This theory is formed around seven principle propositions that link specific leadership styles to positive and negative outcomes in a dynamic and predictable way. Specifically:

1. There are several fundamental problems that have to be solved in any group context, and alternative theses and antitheses that have survived the test of time stand as potential solutions that leaders could adopt to manage these problems.
2. The theses and antitheses available to leaders take the form of dual or opposing processes, with both virtues and liabilities, such that each solution solves one set of problems (Problem Set A) while at the same time introducing an alternative set of problems (Problem Set B).
3. Over extended periods of time, the problems eliminated by the thesis, embodied by the current leader, become less salient and taken for granted, whereas the problems the thesis creates become more salient and urgent.
4. Internal political and/or external competitive pressures develop that create momentum favoring the antitheses, and latent conflict associated with the status quo solution builds.
5. This latent conflict lies dormant until a succession episode triggers a transformation from latent conflict to manifest conflict directed at the eventual overthrow of the thesis adopted by the current leader in favor of the antithesis represented in some alternative leader.
6. Once adopted by the new leader, this antithesis or synthesis then becomes the new thesis, and the process begins anew.

7. Over multiple cycles, changes that are primarily driven by genuine external competitive pressures are likely to be adaptive, whereas changes that are primarily driven by fabricated internal political pressures are more likely to become cyclical or even maladaptive.

Opponent processes: Moving beyond the “fit” metaphor and contingency theories

Thus, instead of a “contingency theory” or “fit” metaphor, the opponent process theory of leadership proposes a “self-regulation” conceptualization that emphasizes countervailing processes and alternative steady states or points along some continuum. If the debate underlying the opponent process conflict is well informed regarding the virtues and liabilities of alternative theses and antitheses, then the choice of a new leader who adopts one solution is made cognizant of the predictable problems likely to be generated by that solution. In contrast, if the debate underlying the opponent process conflict is not well informed about these trade-offs, then this process might result in the premature abandonment of a viable thesis whose current liabilities are highly salient, but whose virtues are taken for granted, for an alternative that is actually worse, but whose liabilities are less salient. This is most likely to be the case when the underlying base for change is driven more by internal political forces using the liabilities embodied in the current solution as pretext for change, relative to when there is compelling evidence that changes in the external competitive environment are driving the perceived need for change.

Thus, an awareness of the nature of opponent processes and the generic interplay of theses and antitheses is a necessary but insufficient condition for harnessing these forces towards effective leadership succession. In addition to understanding the basic elements of the *process*, we need a more delineated understanding of the *content* that forms specific

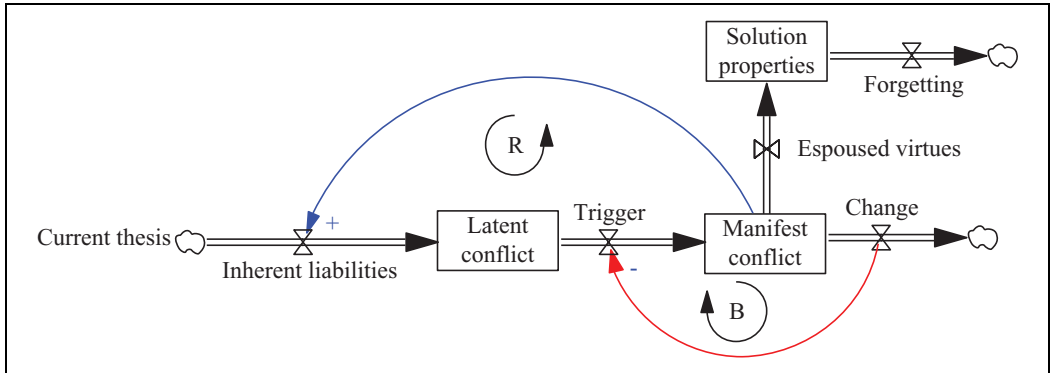


Figure 2. A generic model of opponent processes.
 Note. We thank the editor for suggesting this figure.

theses and antitheses in the area of group leadership. In the next section, we explore four specific theses and antitheses that frequently serve as the content around which opponent process debates are organized. We use examples from the scientific literature to describe these theses and antitheses. Although we do not propose this as an exhaustive list, these illustrate highly common theses and antitheses for leaders, and are useful for initiating a more public and systematic process of opponent process theorizing in the area of leadership.

Figure 2 depicts in a generic sense how this process can be considered in terms of a stock and flow diagram. In this figure, stocks are represented by boxes where levels rise and fall linearly over time, and the rate of change is controlled by the flows, represented by the “hour glass” shapes. At the far left, one sees that the current thesis, due to its liabilities, creates a flow of problems that is retained in a stock that we refer to as latent conflict. This latent conflict builds and builds until some trigger, like a leadership succession opportunity, opens the next valve which then flows into a stock that we refer to as manifest conflict.

As the level of manifest conflict rises, two important changes in the system take place. First, the system opens the “liability valve” (represented by the arc arrow) which is a mechanism by which

people feel free to openly discuss the problems associated with the thesis. This discussion reinforces commonly perceived deficiencies with the thesis and may even add new and unique liabilities not commonly recognized, creating a reinforcing feedback loop (open opposition begets even more opposition). Second, this manifest conflict also causes people to discuss the virtues of some antithesis or synthesis, which fills the stock of “solution properties.” Thus, pressure begins to build for some alternative to the thesis embodied by potential leadership successors who symbolize the alternative solution.

After the leadership succession event, the change in leadership causes this manifest conflict to dissipate through the system (exiting to the right of the figure). In addition, the change in leadership allows the group to experience the espoused benefits of the new solution (see the top of Figure 2) and the new leader and new practice may enter a “honeymoon period” of general acceptance. However, no honeymoon lasts forever, and over extended periods of time, the group begins to experience the liabilities associated with the new solution. Lack of perfect organizational memory also means that the liabilities associated with the former thesis begin to be forgotten, setting the antithesis up for the same fate as the original thesis, only with their positions reversed.

If the opponent process theory depicted in this figure simply oscillates through a series of alternative negation episodes driven by internal political pressures to cede power, totally uninformed of the virtues and liabilities associated with each solution, then this process becomes a predictably seasonal one. This seasonality may be benign for the group (but not leaders) or maladaptive (e.g., by trading a set of problems that the group is used to dealing with for a set of new problems that they may be ill-equipped to manage). In contrast, if the process moves progressively through a series of syntheses driven by external competitive concerns fully informed by the virtues and liabilities associated with each solution, then this process can lead to innovation and adaptive growth.

The content of opponent processes: Alternative theses and antitheses for leading groups

Evolutionary theories of leadership recognize that humans are social animals with a long history working in small and medium-sized interdependent task groups under a hierarchical system of leadership (van Vugt et al., 2008). Living within groups better enabled hunter-gatherers to cope with threatening, predator-filled environments, as well as uncertain environments where shelter and water were difficult to find. This need for collective action meant that groups had to determine what to do, how to do it, and when to do it (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992). These groups could fight over each alternative each time a collective decision had to be made, but there were clear efficiencies and evolutionary advantages associated with giving one person disproportionate power to determine what to do, how to do it, and when to do it (van Vugt et al., 2008). Indeed, helping to solve these specific problems is often suggested as the evolutionary reason why leadership developed in hunter-gatherer societies (Buss & Duntley, 2008). It has

also been used to explain why followers were willing to surrender autonomy to a recognized leader, despite what might appear to be selection disadvantages associated with individual acquiescence (Kessler & Cohrs, 2008).

Some recurrent problems in groups include common issues associated with (a) how to convert a myriad of different opinions into a single decision that represents the group's intention, (b) what specific tasks will be performed by which people when the task requires differentiation, (c) who will be in versus out of the group, and (d) how to distribute the rewards that accrue from collective group activity. These four inherent issues that need to be resolved in any group have traditionally invited alternative solutions. Some of these alternatives have stood the test of time, and thus stand as potential theses or antitheses, whereas others have not.

For example, as we noted earlier in our extended example, with respect to collective decision-making, the *universal problem* is how to pool multiple preferences held by different people into a single group decision. Some of the common alternatives to this problem that have survived that test of time include reaching consensus versus voting versus having a hierarchical leader decide for the group. In contrast, relying on the reading of tea leaves or the interpretation of dreams or an analysis of configurations of stellar constellations are not alternatives that have survived the test of time, and these are not potential theses or antitheses that would be acceptable in modern organizations.

Thus, when it comes to the origins of theses and antitheses, *all groups* confront the problem, and there are common practices that have survived the test of time long enough to be considered viable potential menu options when it comes to solving that problem. These alternative solutions to common problems that have stood the test of time can be expressed in the form of opponent processes. Some of these practices may be literally opposite ends of a single continuum, but in other cases they may be categorical alternatives that differ on

multiple underlying continuous dimensions. Moreover, because these solutions have withstood the test of time, they have attracted a great deal of attention in the academic literature. That is, there are specific literatures that have devoted their efforts to understanding the virtues and liabilities associated with the common alternatives for problems, and these literatures would fall under the general headings of (a) “collective decision-making” (e.g., Greer & van Kleff, 2010), (b) “task decomposition” (e.g., Lewis & Herndon, 2011), (c) “group composition” (e.g., Humphrey, Hollenbeck, Meyer, & Ilgen, 2007) and (d) “reward structures” (Pearsall, Christian, & Ellis, 2010). As we noted earlier, because the leader has disproportionate influence on how all of these problems are going to be addressed, this serves as a useful starting point for an examination of alternative theses and antitheses regarding leadership styles.

According to the opponent process theory of leadership, there are well-established alternative solutions available to leaders for each of these recurrent problems that can be gleaned from both the formal research literature on groups and organizations, as well as popular press discussions of leadership. Each of these theses and antitheses has certain advantages and disadvantages, and the extant literature has gone a long way in terms of explaining and empirically documenting the pros and cons of alternative theses and antitheses. In some literatures, like the group composition, the duality (heterogeneity vs. homogeneity) is clearly used in an explicit fashion to compare, contrast, and develop contingency statements. In other literatures, like those on reward structures, parallel literatures develop that do not cross-reference each other. For example, the literature on social interdependence theory holds up cooperative, group-based rewards as the solution for dysfunctional within-group competition, but the social loafing literature holds up individually based equitable rewards as the solution to free-riding (Beersma,

Hollenbeck, Humphrey, Moon, & Conlon, 2003). This duality is not explicitly recognized by those alternative literatures.

In the next four subsections we will describe how the opponent processes are treated in the formal research literature. In order to more fully articulate this theory, the four subsections examine the two opponent process solutions that have been identified for each of the four problems identified in the previous lines. To ease the exposition, we will focus on the ends of the continuum for the central dimension that differentiates the alternatives. We recognize, however, that in some cases, the alternatives may not be categorical and involve multiple underlying dimensions. We also recognize for each dimension, the magnitude of the directional swing that vary by magnitude. In fact, we formally propose three boundary conditions or moderator variables that are likely to strengthen or attenuate the magnitude of these opponent processes.

Our major purpose is to list the symptoms that are associated with excessive reliance on one opponent process unchecked by the other. This serves as the thesis that will ultimately be challenged by a specific antithesis. The research literature on each of these issues is voluminous, and our intent with these sections is not to provide an exhaustive literature review. Instead, we illustrate how the opponent process embedded within each issue is reflected in the literature, and document the symptoms of excessive reliance on one process versus another in order to ground this theory in the existing theoretical and empirical knowledge base.

Collective decision-making: Hierarchical versus consensus

As noted earlier, all work groups face the problem of combining multiple, and perhaps, conflicting preferences into a single decision that represents the group’s intent. Two common alternative methods for addressing this problem

include using hierarchical versus consensus-based approaches. Hierarchical decision-making systems use the judgment of one person, typically the group's leader, as the choice of the group. This person may or may not seek input, and several different lines of research have examined how this person combines his or her own ideas with those of others to arrive at unitary decisions (Zhang & Peterson, 2011). In contrast, consensus decisions require agreement of all members on the choice. Although these represent extreme points on this continuum, midway along this continuum are various synthesis solutions such as majority rule voting or supermajority rule voting (e.g., requiring a 2/3 majority). In the end, however, all collectives must have rules in place for how they are going to consolidate a myriad set of individual judgments into a single choice for the group as a whole, and some of these have stood the test of time and thus become legitimate theses or antitheses. The choice by any one leader to select one of these approaches as the thesis immediately sets up the unselected option as the antithesis that might be adopted by a different leader.

With respect to decision-making procedures, several formal theories of leadership and group decision-making provide insight into potential opponent processes. First, the Vroom and Yetton (1973) decision tree model identifies four general classes of leaders' decision-making styles: authoritarian, consultative, delegation, and group-based. These styles are then evaluated based on their effectiveness for different situations and different types of followers. In some situations the model advocates a hierarchical decision, but in other situations the model advocates a consensus decision where the solution implemented has the support of the entire group. This model recognizes trade-offs between the alternatives on this collective decision-making model in that the leader must decide on what criterion is most important. If the emphasis is on speed, avoiding conflict among members, or the quality of the decision in a context where members have different

goals, the model steers the leader toward the hierarchical end of the continuum. Conversely, if the objective is to develop subordinates and ensure acceptance and implementation of the decision, the model suggests a consensus-based approach.

Another formal leadership theory addressing decision-making is the path-goal theory (House, 1971). This theory addresses how leaders motivate followers via their decision-making style. The styles most relevant to the current discussion are directive (i.e., autocratic) and achievement-oriented (i.e., consensus) that reflect the same thesis and antithesis that is discernable in the Vroom-Yetton model. Path-goal theory also specifies "participative" as a meaningful midway point between these two ends of the continuum. Research has shown that directive styles work best when the group lacks cohesiveness, whereas achievement-oriented leadership works best when group members are cohesive (Keller, 1989).

Although largely independent of the theories and literature described earlier, a large amount of research in the behavioral decision-making literature also reflects the existence of opponent processes. One branch of this literature presumes the need for consensus-based decisions and focuses specifically on how groups arrive at consensus decisions (N. L. Kerr & Tindale, 2004). Several alternative quantitative models that describe how multiple viewpoints converge into unitary decisions have been developed under the heading of social decision or social transition schemes. This research shows the importance of the group's decision rule for combining preferences (Laughlin & Ellis, 1986), and the bias introduced if members fail to exchange unshared information (e.g., Stasser, Taylor, & Hanna, 1989).

In contrast, a separate body of literature on group decision-making assumes the need for hierarchical decisions (Zhang & Peterson, 2011). This literature focuses on how decisions are made by an individual who has responsibility for making judgments that affect other

people. This literature suggests that hierarchically led groups rarely make decisions as good as those rendered by their best member (N. L. Kerr & Tindale, 2004). For example, the multi-level theory of team decision-making (Colquitt, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, LePine, & Sheppard, 2002; Hollenbeck et al., 1995) and research on judge-advisor systems (Snizek & Buckley, 1995) both examine how decision makers weigh and process their own information in conjunction with the information of subordinates. This research shows that most leaders fail to arrive at an optimal scheme for integrating the diverse opinions of staff members, even when provided with timely and accurate outcome feedback. Leaders tend to use a simple, intuitive, average weighting approach to all of the members, unless there is a clear outlier who often is truncated (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). Leaders rarely give enough weight to the best member and often rely more than they should on the worst member. Leaders also tend to give their own opinion more weight relative to subordinates, and that confidence, rather than past accuracy, often determines which subordinate gets more relative weight than others (e.g., Snizek & Buckley, 1995).

The existence of one literature that presumes the need for consensus and a separate literature that presumes the need for hierarchical decision-making shows the ubiquity of each of these alternatives and their ability to withstand the test of time. Still, the two types of decision-making processes are mutually exclusive alternatives, and therefore, form a thesis and antithesis with respect to how decisions should be made. As illustrated in Figure 1, a group whose leader opts for hierarchical decision-making processes may experience symptoms such as less commitment by the group to the decision, suboptimal decisions based on overweighting by individual decision maker, and lack of employee development. Hierarchical decisions may also result in increased turnover due to the lack of inclusion

and development of employees. On the other hand, groups whose leader relies on consensus decision-making processes will experience symptoms such as suboptimal satisficing or compromising decisions, where no individual takes responsibility for the final choice. In addition, reliance on consensus results in a slow process that can be derailed by a single member. Thus, if either of these systems were in place as the guiding thesis of a current leader, one could use the antithesis as a natural prerequisite for any future leader if a succession opportunity were to arise.

In the top panel of Figure 1, we depict how this process might lead to full negation, that is, a swing from one end of the continuum to the other (hierarchical to consensus). In the bottom panel of Figure 1 we depict how this could operate in the other direction (from consensus to hierarchical). Although we depict full swings in this figure, we recognize that in most cases, one would see only partial swings (synthesis solutions). For example, instead of swinging all the way from hierarchical to consensus, the group might move midway to a majority vote solution. Or even more incrementally, the movement might be from a leader who uses voting methods for 25% of group decisions to one who uses voting methods on 50% of the group decisions. In a subsequent section of this manuscript, we identify specific variables that serve as boundary conditions that determine the *magnitude*, and not just the *direction*, of movement along various dimensions.

Task decomposition: Mechanistic versus organic

All groups face the problem of how to decompose a large mission into smaller tasks that can then be assigned to individuals (Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010). This typically results in role differentiation, and there are two specific solutions to this process which constitute the thesis and antithesis of task decomposition for would-be leaders. One end of the spectrum, task

decomposition involves designing groups using a *mechanistic approach*, whereas the other end of that spectrum involves designing groups using an *organic approach* (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Each alternative has distinct advantages and disadvantages that have allowed them to survive the test of time, and they serve as thesis and antithesis for dealing with task decomposition. This dialectic can be detected in several different topic areas in the organizational sciences, but we will examine just two of these literatures: structural contingency theory and job design.

In terms of organizational structure, mechanistic structures are characterized by high levels of centralization and functional departmentation that create highly formalized and narrow roles, where each member of the collective specializes on a small part of the overall task. One aspect of this specialization entails decision-making authority, which is invested in professional managers arranged to create a centralized system for planning. The primary advantages of mechanistic structures are that they promote efficiency and a narrow focus of attention for group members. This reduces the role of individual differences in role enactment, which reduces staffing pressures. Functional organizations also develop economies of scale by avoiding duplication of resources and reducing the need for highly skilled personnel by relying more on the close monitoring of written rules and regulations. This efficiency can be used to drive down costs and the number of people involved in operations. Centralization helps to ensure that the efforts of a large number of different group members can be coordinated. In addition, routine errors tend to be controlled in the sense that actions and decisions are monitored closely by a supervisor, who often has more experience or more information relative to lower level operators (Gerloff, 1985).

The disadvantage associated with mechanistic structures is that efficiency is achieved at the price of reduced flexibility due to the narrow skill range of group members (Hollenbeck et al.,

2002). Mechanistic structures are also slow to respond to change because decisions need to be planned and approved by higher level authorities. Mechanistic structures also are marked by reduced capacity for learning about, and exploiting, local variations because higher level authorities are often far removed from the local context and lower level operatives were not selected for their high skill levels (Ellis et al., 2003). Also, these narrowly focused functional cells may develop a parochial orientation where members care more about their own sub-mission or professional identity than they do about the larger goals of the organization, reducing commitment and promoting opportunistic attrition. Finally, the lack of direct comparability between functional specialists makes performance comparisons difficult, and the high level of interdependence promotes "finger-pointing" in the context of performance failures.

If mechanistic structures are thus considered the thesis adopted by one leader, then, organic structures can be considered the antithesis that might be embraced by a different leader. Indeed, one can point to several intrinsic advantages associated with organic structures that directly counter the problems associated with mechanistic structures. Organic structures are characterized by divisional departmentation and decentralized decision-making schemes. Lower level operatives in organic structures must have a varied skill set because they perform a broad range of tasks where there are fewer formalized rules and procedures. Because lower level operatives can make decisions and initiate actions, they tend to respond better to dynamic conditions without having to seek approval from a supervisor. Lower level operatives may have a better grassroots appreciation of local conditions and role execution can be modified to reflect these conditions. Communication in organic structures is less scripted and coordination is achieved more by mutual adjustment (Robey, 1991).

Of course, rejecting the mechanistic thesis in favor of the organic antithesis results in one

inheriting the disadvantages associated with this choice. Organic structures have several inherent liabilities, such as a lack of coordination between independent and empowered subunits or individuals (i.e., “the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing”). Organic structures are also inefficient in that they promote functional redundancies and slack resources that lead to bloated staffing levels and higher costs. These structures also allow for unwitting cannibalization or destructive competition where the gains in one subunit are achieved at the expense of another subunit (Neff & Citrin, 2005). Finally, information and lessons learned by one isolated subunit (or person) are less likely to be diffused across the organization. This results in the recurrence of errors and a situation where there is wide variability between the best and worst individuals that might have been mitigated by closer monitoring, centralized control, and other characteristics of mechanistic structures.

The same form of thesis and antithesis can be seen at a lower level in the literature on job design. Campion (1988) identified two approaches to designing work labeled “mechanistic” and “motivational.” Within this literature, mechanistic job design serves as the original thesis, and motivational design is the antithesis, and as one would expect, there are definite trade-offs associated with the two designs (Morgeson & Campion, 2002). Mechanistic design stems from scientific management and emphasizes efficiency, work simplification, and specialization. Due to its simplicity, the mechanistic approach decreases training time, lowers selection criteria and wages, and decreases opportunities for routine errors. In addition, the mechanistic design reduces mental overload and stress.

In contrast, the motivational approach to job design stems from work on job enrichment (Hackman, 1976) and emphasizes characteristics of work such as large task scope, autonomy, and feedback. The motivational approach results in high job satisfaction, high intrinsic motivation, and lower absenteeism. Trade-offs

occur when designing work around the two approaches with the advantages of one mirroring the disadvantages of the other. Leaders who design work via the mechanistic approach experience lower job satisfaction, lower motivation, and higher absenteeism within their work group. In the current global economy, efficiency-oriented mechanistic approaches are increasingly found in nations that have an oversupply of low-skilled workers with fewer alternative employment opportunities where these issues matter less. In contrast, nations that employ skilled workers working in tight labor markets often rely on motivational approaches, but these also come with increased training time, higher staff levels, higher wages, and increased chances of mental overload in the work group in the form of role ambiguity and stress. Thus, the choice to adopt one job design approach as the thesis immediately subjects this approach to criticism from those who would advocate the antithesis.

Thus, if one were to replace the content within the “inherent problems with the thesis” box of Figure 1 in order to reflect the opponent processes associated with task decomposition (instead of collective decision-making), then if mechanistic design was the thesis, the problems associated with this would be (a) slow decision-making, (b) reduced flexibility, (c) reduced capacity for exploiting local variation, and (d) low accountability. Organic task decomposition stands as the antithesis to mechanistic design, but it is associated with its own “inherent problems” that would include, (a) poor coordination, (b) reduced efficiency due to redundancies, (c) high recurrence of routine errors, and (d) poor diffusion of lessons learned.

Member composition: Homogeneity versus heterogeneity

All groups have boundaries, and thus one problem that all groups need to address is how to decide who is to be included and excluded. There are two specific solutions to this process

that constitute the thesis and antithesis of group composition for would-be leaders. One alternative is to make selection decisions so that members are homogenous in their characteristics, whereas the alternative solution is to staff the group so that members are heterogeneous (Thatcher & Patel, 2011). A variety of literatures touch on this issue, but we focus our attention on two specific streams of research that clearly illustrate the dynamic interplay of a thesis and antithesis. The first literature we will examine focuses on relational demography, and the second focuses on person–organization fit.

The changing nature of the workforce has led to a great deal of research on diversity in groups and two perspectives emerge from this literature (Homan et al., 2008). First, the “value-in-diversity” perspective suggests that diversity creates competitive advantages for organizations (Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991). The second perspective, the “diversity-as-conflict” perspective, holds that variability among group members detracts from cohesiveness, shared understanding, and common goals (Jackson et al., 1991). These two perspectives form the thesis and antithesis of a debate regarding composition, and a potential leader could find support to justify either approach.

Williams and O’Reilly (1998) show that demographic variation within groups affects their ability in three areas, including (a) information and decision-making, (b) social categorization, and (c) similarity and attraction. In terms of decision-making, heterogeneity can increase information availability, and thus enhance problem-solving capability and creativity. Indeed, a separate literature on “groupthink” (see Turner & Pratkanis, 1998) identifies homogeneity of membership as a cause of restricted information search, limited discussion, and premature consensus seeking that leads to slow recognition of changes in the environment. This constitutes the “value-in-diversity” rationale for seeking heterogeneity in composition and one could envision a leader embracing this principle as a thesis.

Williams and O’Reilly (1998) also present evidence from a social categorization perspective that diversity promotes biases, factionalism, communication difficulties, and decreased cohesiveness. In some cases, problems caused by social categorization processes are based upon cultural and demographic factors, and the literature on social identity theory (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986) illustrates how groups often decompose into subsets of in-group and out-group members based on “surface-level” differences. In addition, in organizational contexts, groups break down into subgroups due to interpersonal functional diversity that creates similar types of identification issues (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002). In still other cases, groups can break down due to status differences based upon the variability of expertise in the team. Taken together, this constitutes the “diversity-as-conflict” position, where heterogeneity leads to subgrouping, diminished ability to solve problems, reduced identification with the group, unfairness in performance appraisals, and high turnover. Thus, the “value in diversity” and “diversity as conflict” perspectives are alternative solutions to the group composition problem, and if one of these solutions is accepted as the thesis of one leader, the alternative solution stands ready as an antithesis for a successor.

This same duality can be detected in the literature on person–organizational fit. Although the general argument that a person needs to “fit” with their group or organization seems intuitive, a close inspection of this literature reveals two different types of fit that serve as a thesis and antithesis (Cable & Edwards, 2004). On the one hand, one approach to fit focuses on ensuring that the person fits with the organization in terms of sharing or matching the characteristics of the majority of members and leaders. This is referred to as “supplementary fit,” and research in this tradition has shown that low supplementary fit results in low job satisfaction and high turnover (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Based on this perspective,

measurement inventories that capture the values of applicants and incumbents are developed and used by recruiters to ensure “fit” with the organization or the group (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

In contrast, the concept of “complementary fit” also has a long history in the applied social sciences (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Complementary fit occurs when the characteristic that a person holds is absent from the group (Kausel & Slaughter, 2011). In this sense, the person helps make the collective “whole.” Thus, rather than populating the organization with homogeneous members, one should instead recruit members who are in some way unique relative to the extant membership due to their experience or expertise, especially when identification with the team is high (van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). Approaches emphasizing complementary fit tend to focus on people’s skills and performance, whereas approaches that focus on supplementary fit tend to focus on their values and attrition. Skills and values, however, are often related, and attrition is a known cause of lower group performance; thus, the two approaches can be viewed as a thesis and antithesis. If the leader of an organization emphasized one alternative (the thesis), then advocates of change could readily invoke the logic of the antithesis as a requirement for any future leader.

Thus, if one were to replace the content within the “inherent problems with the thesis” box of Figure 1 in order to reflect the opponent processes associated with team member composition (instead of collective decision-making), then if homogeneity was the thesis, the problems associated with this would be (a) reduced creativity, (b) restricted information search, (c), premature consensus, and (d) slow recognition of environmental change. Selecting for heterogeneity then stands as the antithesis relative to homogeneous composition, but it is associated with its own “inherent problems” that would include, (a) reduced commitment to the group, (b) biased performance appraisals,

(c) formation of subgroups and faultlines, and (d) dysfunctional within-group conflict.

Structuring rewards: Equity versus equality

The last opponent process we will explore focuses on how leaders allocate rewards within the group. All leaders need to confront this issue because rewards need to be administered in order to motivate effort and retain members. Alternative theses and antitheses exist with respect to how leaders can structure reward systems (Lambert, 2011). Equality norms focus on ensuring that individuals within the group all receive similar levels of rewards, thus minimizing within-group distinctions regarding pay and status. Equity norms, on the other hand, place central emphasis on recognizing and differentiating group members with respect to their inputs, and then making corresponding distinctions in outcomes such as promotion and pay. Equity and equality norms for reward structuring represent a thesis and antithesis because it is difficult to embrace both alternatives at the same time or in the same place. As with the other opponent processes we have covered, one can find formal theoretical treatments of this issue at both the individual and organizational levels of analysis, and a leader who adopts either approach as his or her thesis, sets up the antithesis as a logical and perhaps, appealing alternative for his or her successor.

In the research literature, the equality side of the continuum is described by Deutsch in the social interdependence theory (SIT) of cooperation. Deutsch (1949) argued that people’s beliefs about how their rewards are related determine the way in which they interact, which in turn affects their performance and group cohesiveness. According to Deutsch (1949), when a situation is structured cooperatively, each individual group member receives the same reward. When a situation is structured competitively, people within the group tend to be differentiated in terms of their contributions and rewarded commensurately.

According to SIT, cooperatively structured situations create perceptions of shared fate and promote supportive behavior. In addition, insights and lessons learned by one member are shared so that all benefit vicariously from others' experiences. On the other hand, rather than share information and experience, people placed in competitive structures keep valuable information proprietary, and diffusion of new ideas is restricted. Moreover, rather than supporting each other, people placed in competitive reward structures may even be motivated to impair the progress of others in an effort to gain some advantage, and thus there are good reasons for leaders to opt for an equality-based reward structure.

However, there are also significant liabilities associated with equality-based rewards in groups. Most importantly, equality-based rewards often promote process losses associated with social loafing, where some members of the group take advantage of others by doing less work or decreasing their contributions to group productivity (Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). Social loafing is tempting when effort or time is costly to provide because the rewards the group receives are shared equally among all group members (Albanese & van Fleet, 1985). The implications for the group are that the group's productivity may be lowered, especially if higher performing members feel like "suckers" and start reducing their own levels of contributions commensurately.

In contrast to SIT and its emphasis on equal rewards, equity theorists have emphasized the role of equitable reward systems that make fine distinctions in the level of contributions made by group members (Adams & Rosenbaum, 1962). Equity theory posits that people evaluate the fairness of their rewards by comparing themselves with other people. The theory proposes that individuals form a ratio of their perceived inputs and perceived rewards, and then compare this to the same ratio for some reference person. If the ratios are not equal, the individual perceives this as unfair, and

experiences anger (underreward) or guilt (overreward) which energizes various actions. The key according to this theory is to manage individual fairness perceptions of reward allocations via the differentiation of reward allocations. The limitation of this approach, however, is that if individuals seek to maximize their own individual rewards within the group, the differentiation process can lead to information hoarding, cover-ups of individual errors, and destructive competition.

One can see a similar opponent process play out with respect to the literature on strategic pay and compensation policies in the human resource management literature. In particular, the strategic compensation literature has identified a set of competing alternative pay practices, as well as decision rules for choosing each (Montemayor, 1996). Many of these choices would be recognizable to those familiar with SIT and equity theory, particularly the degree to which the options recognize the costs and benefits associated with maintaining equality or equity in the distribution of resources. On the one hand, this literature identifies a variety of programs linking the pay of individuals to the performance of the group, making few distinctions between people within the group on how rewards are distributed (Rynes, Gerhart, & Parks, 2005). For example, in profit-sharing programs or gain-sharing programs, each member of the organization receives a reward at the end of the year based upon firm (or sub-unit) performance. The key feature of all of these programs is that they share an emphasis on distributing gains to all members of the group on an equal basis. The strategic pay literature advocates the use of these types of programs where the organization wants to promote a collaborative culture, teamwork, learning, and innovation while simultaneously reducing within-unit competition (Lawler & Mohnman, 1989).

Of course, not every employee will perceive a tight link between exactly how much effort he or she puts forth, and the overall organizational

profit (or the cost structure of their subunit). This weak link between individual accountability and rewards reduces motivation and may promote the type of social loafing identified earlier. One viable solution to this problem is the use of more equity-oriented pay programs that rely on individual-based incentives or merit-based pay (Mulvey & Klein, 1998). Incentives establish rewards associated with the accomplishment of specific goals where the rules are laid out in advance. Incentives are often competitively based for practical reasons related to estimating labor costs (i.e., one can anticipate awarding one, and only one, pink Cadillac each year, but cannot risk having to give away 50). In contrast to incentive systems that lay out the rules in advance, merit systems tend to be more historical and award various raise percentages to employees based upon individual performance at the end of the year. Because the raise pool tends to be a fixed pie, merit systems are necessarily competitive and anyone who obtains a raise that is higher than average can only do so at the cost of some other individual (Harris, Gilbreath, & Sunday, 1998).

The strategic compensation literature explicitly recognizes the opponent nature of the processes elicited by the two different sets of reward systems. As Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright (2002) note:

Relying exclusively on merit pay or individual incentives may result in high levels of work motivation but unacceptable levels of individualistic and competitive behavior and too little concern for broader plant or organizational goals. Relying too heavily on profit sharing and gain sharing plans may increase cooperation and concern for the entire welfare of the entire plant or organization, but it may reduce individual work motivation to unacceptable levels. (2002, p. 517)

The solution to this duality in this literature is to adopt a balanced scorecard approach that seeks to find a compromise between the alternative

outcomes. The very term “balanced” underscores the opponent nature of the two solutions. Once a leader invokes any one set point at either end of the continuum or the middle, this could invite competition or attacks from those who would exploit the weaknesses of that approach in favor of some alternative that lies more to the equity or equality side of the continuum.

Thus, if one were to replace the content within the “inherent problems with the thesis” box of Figure 1 in order to reflect the opponent processes associated with reward structures (instead of collective decision-making), then if equity was the thesis, the problems associated with this would be (a) less helping behavior, (b) restricted information sharing, (c) dysfunctional within-group competition, and (d) lack of transparency and cover-ups of errors. Equality-based reward structures then stand as the antithesis relative to equity-based rewards, but they are associated with their own “inherent problems” that would include, (a) potential social loafing and free-riding, (b) perceived distributive injustice, (c) uncontrolled peer retribution directed to low performers, and (d) turnover among high performers.

Boundary conditions and moderating influences

Although there are theoretical reasons to believe that opponent processes operate in the area of leadership succession, the question still remains as to when these processes play out with more or less strength. That is, if one moves away from considering the dualities as polar opposites, and instead recognizes that these are continuums with many different points in between the extremes, we need to address the question, “when does a successor swing all the way to the other side versus when does he or she swing only part-way.”

We propose three boundary conditions or moderator variables, and predict that the nature of opponent processes will be stronger when (a) there is a perception of poor predecessor

performance, (b) the succession is at a high level in the organization, (c) there has been a long time interval between successions. In contrast, one is likely to see smaller, more incremental changes, when the successor is a low-level leader who follows a popular predecessor whose reign was not particularly long in duration (see Figure 1). We discuss the rationale for these boundary conditions next, however, we should again stress that although the changes for this latter leader are likely to be smaller in *magnitude*, we still believe that there will be changes in *direction* as specified by this theory.

Perceived performance of the predecessor

It is clear that a leader who comes into a situation that demands a turnaround, especially one attributed to prior leadership, has a more powerful mandate for change relative to a leader who comes into a situation where the predecessor's perceived level of performance was high. When perceived performance is high the tendency will be to "stay the course." Not surprisingly, the level of past performance of the predecessor is a well-established predictor of the *perceived need for a succession* (Kesner & Sebor, 1994), and few would dispute this.

If the evidence regarding performance is ambiguous (i.e., inconsistent trends in one metric, or inconsistencies between multiple metrics, or subjective perceptions among multiple constituencies), then the size of the shift may be less extreme and lean more toward some kind of synthesis rather than full negation. In contexts where the evidenced is mixed, the degree to which advocates of the antithesis can "control the narrative," and create a sense of clear urgency from a set of mixed signals may be the most important element in bringing about change.

More critical to the theory being developed here, the level of predecessor performance has been linked to the *amount of change* one sees in

the successor's "strategic orientation," especially in stable, relative to turbulent, environments (Gordon, Stewart, Sweo, & Luker, 2000). In stable environments there tends to be more internal, leader-based attributions for poor performance. In contrast, leaders seem to be treated more leniently when they are perceived to be victims of turbulent environments. These "strategic reorientation" studies focus more on marketing-related activities, and do not directly address leadership style per se. Still, the underlying idea that a new leader is given more latitude to change (or confronted with stronger expectations for change) when the perceived level of the predecessor was low is likely to generalize to choices regarding leadership style as well. Thus, we would propose that when the perceived past performance level of the predecessor is low this promotes faster and more extreme changes in direction relative to a context where the perceptions of the predecessor's performance were high.

Hierarchical level

Although the processes we describe here could play out in all kinds of teams, because of their importance, the way this plays out in top-management teams versus low-level teams is critical to discuss. For three reasons, we believe that although opponent processes could play out at any level, the strength of these processes is likely to be greater at higher, as opposed to lower, levels. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find articles that involve CEO successions that do not directly describe the succession in opponent process terms. In popular press reports about leadership succession at the CEO level, the new CEO routinely explains how he or she is going to be the same or different relative to the previous CEO. Doing this in a way that clarifies differences and reinforces commonalities in a manner that does not insult the predecessor is an art form among leaders at this level, and is an example where theory is far

behind practice in the area of groups and leadership (Hollenbeck, DeRue, & Guzzo, 2004).

First, leadership at higher levels tends to be more symbolic than leadership at lower levels, which tends to be more operational. As many of the changes that a new, high-level leader might instantiate are bent on sending a symbolic message regarding how and why things are going to be different, there may be a more explicit triggering of a direct comparison and contrast process that one might not see at lower levels (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Second, by definition, leaders at higher levels have more power, and this may grant them more freedom in being able to manifest the leadership style of their choice (Bateman, O'Neill, & Kentworthy-U'Ren, 2002). In contrast, low-level group leaders may be more constrained by the nature of the group task, their personnel, and the policies set by higher level leaders, to be able to manifest the style of their choice as easily. Finally, in small groups, leaders can engage in much more real-time, face-to-face interactions with followers or their own supervisors to preempt opponent processes. Moreover, followers may understand their own small, local group better than issues at higher levels where they have access to less accurate information and experience. Thus, they are less likely to make more person-based, "leader-oriented" attributions for negative outcomes that create demands for leadership change (Weber, Camerer, Rottenstreich, & Knez, 2001). As was the case with the strategic reorientation literature, the degree to which attributions for processes and outcomes are aimed at the leader is an important aspect of how strongly opponent processes are likely to manifest themselves.

Length of time between successions

One of the rationales for why we believe there needs to be a greater emphasis on opponent processes in the area of leadership succession is the general need to incorporate the role of time in this topic area (see Avolio, 2007). That is, as we noted at the outset of this article, there

have been radical changes in how scholars have conceptualized groups and organizations based upon temporal dynamics. Unfortunately, this has not translated into changes in how researchers have conceptualized leadership of groups and organizations. In the context of leadership succession, the role of time is explicitly addressed by this opponent process theory. In particular, we propose that the actual length of time between succession episodes will serve as a boundary condition that will strengthen the magnitude of change one sees as a result of opponent processes. There are three reasons why we believe one will see larger swings in styles between predecessors and successors as the time between successions gets longer.

First, one of the key drivers of opponent processes relates to group or organizational memory. The proposition is that there is a tendency to forget, or take for granted, the problems that were solved by any one particular style, and instead, focus on the more salient problems the same style generates. Thus, as the time period between successions grows longer, the more this organizational memory erodes because of organizational attrition that introduces new members less familiar with the group's history (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). In addition, even among members with long tenure, because they have not recently encountered the problems that the style solves, their memory of those problems may be embellished relative to the immediate problems caused by the instantiation of that same style.

Second, the longer the time between successions, the more opportunity there is for the leader in place to drift out of alignment with changes in the external competitive environment (Seo & Creed, 2002). Earlier, we defined external competitive pressures as factors outside the group (e.g., product markets, labor markets, or technological developments) that require changes in leadership style to maintain effectiveness. The degree of dynamism confronting different leaders is likely to vary. All

else being equal, the longer the time period a leader is in place, the more opportunity there is for critical changes to take place that make his or her own style less consistent with the contingencies associated with the context. Thus, the longer the time period between successions, the more pressure may build up that supports larger shifts from one duality to another.

Third, longer time periods between a succession could create more internal political pressures in favor of stronger changes in direction (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 1996). Earlier, we defined internal competitive pressures as factors inside the group that are driven by power acquisition motives of the leader's peers, subordinates, or others' intent on changing the status quo in order to improve their own positions. The longer the time period between successions, the longer the career needs of some of the more ambitious would-be successors might become as they hear their own career clocks ticking. Clearly, members within this group would have to legitimize their motives by cloaking them in the form of concerns driven by external competitive pressures. Indeed, it will not always be easy to untangle which of the two reasons truly underlies the motivation of any opposition group. Still, regardless of the opposition's true motivation (political or competitive), the rhetorical arguments for change will eventually employ a discussion of performance measures. In some cases, the performance evidence may be ambiguous in the sense that there may be multiple performance measures with complex trajectories, and uncertain future states. In fact, even in the face of agreed-upon, objective performance metrics, there could be disagreements with respect to the attributions for past performance, and as we have noted before, attributions to the leader seem to be a key factor in predicting the degree of change.

Finally, regardless of past performance, there could be different expectations for the future. Ironically, one study has found that the faster a founder was able to successfully move

his or her enterprise from the product development stage to the product acceptance stage, the *more likely* he or she was to be replaced by outside financiers, who perceived a need for change in strategy (Wasserman, 2003). Thus, even high levels of past performance may not be enough to fight off determined forces, and as the length of time between successions increases, the more data an opposition group may have to muster the most influential narrative supporting the need for change from this mix of metrics.

Research needs and practical applications

Future research

Although we believe that much of the extant theory and research in a variety of areas can be used to indirectly offer support for the opponent process theory of leadership succession, obviously, direct conceptual and empirical work extending and testing these ideas is needed. In particular, we need a further elaboration of the costs and benefits associated with each duality. In addition, although we present the four content domains separately, future research needs to examine the empirical associations among the different dimensions. On the one hand, it does not seem that the choice of any one alternative on one dimension dictates choices with respect to a different dimension. For example, with respect to composition, a department head could autocratically decide that in order to build on the group's strengths, the next new member selected for the group should make it more homogeneous. The same unit head could decide autocratically that in order to broaden the group's skill base, the next hire should make the group more heterogeneous. Alternatively, the department as a whole could make that decision by trying to reach consensus, but that consensus could go in either direction; towards greater homogeneity or greater heterogeneity. Thus, we do not believe that there is much evidence that choices on one

dimension preordain choices on other dimensions, but this belief needs to be empirically tested.

Second, to ease comparisons and contrasts, we discussed the ends of each continuum, but in many succession episodes, those making the decision, or potential successors, inevitably try to find some happy medium to appease different constituencies. The utility of such compromises cannot be taken for granted. In some cases, a compromise choice, much like “building half of a bridge,” may fail to meet the needs of advocates of either opponent process. Indeed, failure to commit to either end of an opponent process may invite confusion among followers and even be viewed as weakness on the part of the new leader, undermining his or her authority. We need both conceptual and empirical effort to learn when and where compromises make the most sense in terms of meeting the needs of all versus meeting the needs of none.

Third, if compromise is precluded, across an entire career, one leader may have to use different approaches at different times in order to take advantage of opponent processes. On the one hand, this kind of behavioral flexibility could be perceived as just the kind of adaptive behavior that is needed in a dynamic environment (Zaccaro, Kenny, & Foti, 1991). Research suggests that most leaders are not nearly as flexible as many contingency theories demand (Vroom & Jago, 2007), and some older theories, like Fiedler’s contingency theory, essentially deny leader flexibility (Peters, Hartke, & Pohlmann, 1985). Research on 360-degree feedback is more optimistic regarding leader flexibility (Atwater & Waldman, 1998), but the evidence suggests a great deal of support has to be put in place to get true change in leadership styles (goals, follow-ups, contingent rewards, weekly coaching, and so on). Thus, there may be limits to what one can expect to gain from flexibility, and in fact, too much flexibility could be perceived as politically expeditious flip-flopping, if not outright hypocrisy, on the

part of the leader. We clearly need more conceptual and empirical effort directed at discovering how followers react to leaders who display wide-ranging flexibility, isolating the dimensions where flexibility is perceived as more or less acceptable. Perhaps, the use of “strategic bonding,” where coleaders are developed that more naturally embody the alternative style represented by the formal leader would be an easier and more effective means of creating flexibility at a higher level (group as opposed to individual).

The key methodological requirement for testing and extending this theory is to go beyond the vector that represents the current leader’s style with respect to the multiple dualities described here when predicting current group outcomes. In addition to the vector that captures the current leader’s style, one also needs to add the vector that represents his or her predecessor’s style, as well as the interaction of the two styles. If the two vectors are identical, then the organization has “cloned” the successor, and if the two vectors are diametrically opposed, they have chosen his or her “foil.” In most cases, neither of the extremes is likely to be encountered, and thus, one needs to examine contrasts with specific dimensions. Regardless, if current outcomes can be predicted from either the past leader’s style or the interaction of the predecessor’s and successor’s style, this suggests that our ability to predict and understand the impact of leadership is underestimated by not examining temporally based opponent processes.

Practical implications

As we indicated in the previous lines, further conceptual development and direct empirical testing of the opponent process theory of leadership succession is needed to more directly establish its validity. If this evidence is supportive, there are several different practical implications. First, this theory could be viewed as having applied value as a “how to primer”

for executive search firms to support more focused and successful change efforts. These change efforts would systematically trade one leader who employs a specific set of practices that are known to create a clear and present danger, with an alternative leader whose practices eliminate that danger. This decision could be more informed by a greater recognition that the new practices associated with this new leader may result in new, unforeseen dangers, thus supporting a more balanced debate regarding the virtues and liabilities of alternative candidates.

Second, because of the political nature of the Hegelian dialectic, and its emphasis on conflict and power struggles, this theory could have applied value as a “how to primer” on mounting a campaign to usurp leadership in one’s group. That is, if the leader one is eyeing to replace is characterized by a hierarchical style of decision-making and equity-oriented reward structure, then the would-be successor needs to increase the saliency of the drawbacks of those styles. As those styles have well-established drawbacks, such evidence should be available. The potential successor, touting the need for more consensus-based and equality-oriented reward structure, could try to epitomize these styles. As these alternative styles are not actively in place, their drawbacks will not be as salient to the target audience. Moreover, if this audience takes the advantages of the current solutions for granted (because they have not encountered the problems they solved lately), then the stage could be set for coalition formation in opposition to the status quo. Alternatively, if the original targeted leader already manifested a consensus-based and equality-oriented style, the would-be successor could still apply the same general formula for internal succession, but merely reverse the content of the complaints. Thus, the theory could be applied as an “internal coup” model, very much in line with the historical development of Hegelian dialectic.

In addition to applying this theory in an internally competitive and political manner, a

third way to apply it would be to use it as a “how to primer” for developing an externally competitive analytic scheme for attacking some other competing group or organization based upon an analysis of the leadership style. Thus, if one is competing against a group that is led in one fashion (e.g., a mechanistic, homogeneous, hierarchical, and equity-based), there may be opportunities in the labor market or product market for a group that is led in just the opposite fashion (organic, heterogeneous, consensus, and equality-based). This type of strategic positioning is well known in the marketing and strategic arena, but is less generally applied in the leadership arena.

A fourth application of this theory is to employ it as a conceptual tool to help current leaders sustain adaptive organizations that can weather the sort of internal or external attacks described before. Leaders informed by this theory need an awareness of the liabilities and virtues of each opponent process alternative in order to be out in front of changes rather than reacting to them. Although an opponent process theory focuses mainly on how the past affects the current situation, visions of the future also play in terms of circumventing the process and preventing an unwanted succession. That is, a current leader might outflank the opposition by changing his or her policies prior to getting attacked from a specific angle.

So for example, a leader reading popular press reports about problems of “income inequality” might, sensing a shift in collective thought, take steps to move from a more “equity-based” reward structure to a more “equality-based” reward structure. Note that the problem (distributing resources obtained by the collective to individuals within the collective) is a constant, but there are alternative practices for solving this problem. Thus, co-opting the antithesis in advance might be a way of sustaining a leadership position despite changes in the collective zeitgeist over time.

An opponent process leader’s role is to monitor feedback coming from the

environment against specified goals. If the feedback suggests symptoms associated with an excessive reliance on one alternative, the leader could make adjustments to the style in order to eliminate that set of symptoms. If these changes move too far in the other direction, and create the opposing set of symptoms, then the leader can adopt a style that moves slightly in the opposite direction from the original position. A leader employing this model is less likely to be churned by outside consultants, unwittingly outflanked by internal political conspirators, or strategically defeated by external parties that are exploiting the liabilities of the current leadership style. Thus, if the current leader is not intent on leaving, this theory of leadership succession could be used to prevent the perceived need for a successor.

In closing, the complexity of predicting leadership effectiveness across different domains of followers and situations precludes the viability of “one-best-way” models, and as a result, contingency approaches to leadership focused on moderator variables have gained wide acceptance. Our understanding of temporal contingencies and endogenous variables associated with leadership effectiveness is underdeveloped, however, and some have blamed the relatively stagnant nature of our ability to explain variance in outcomes specifically on this deficiency (Avolio, 2007). The formal recognition that “history matters” in interdependent groups (Ilgen et al., 2005) needs to be augmented with a similar recognition that history matters when it comes to understanding the role of the leaders of such groups, particularly at critical moments such as succession.

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