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E. Isaac Mostovicz, Nada K. Kakabadse, Andrew P. Kakabadse,

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# A dynamic theory of leadership development

Theory of  
leadership  
development

E. Isaac Mostovicz

*Janus Thinking Ltd, Jerusalem, Israel*

Nada K. Kakabadse

*Northampton Business School, The University of Northampton,  
Northampton, UK, and*

Andrew P. Kakabadse

*Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield, UK*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to offer a dynamic theory of leadership development.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper examines selected leadership literature through the lens of theory building-blocks. It identifies the role of the ideal goal in leadership and its importance in developing the psychological aspect of leadership.

**Findings** – The paper posits that leadership is a developmental process, which is based on the type of choice a leader makes. While choice implies that two good options are always available from which to select, one should make choices in accordance with the leader's worldview, looking for affiliation (i.e. the Theta worldview), or looking for achievement (i.e. the Lambda worldview). Consequently, leaders need to recognise that the choices they make for organisational activities have to fit their own worldview. Pursuing the fit between one's worldview and planned organisational activities ensures that leaders continuously improve their ethical behaviour. The paper concludes with the presentation of a dynamic theory of leadership, which is based on the assumption that one can only strive toward truly ethical leadership with the knowledge that this goal is beyond human capacity.

**Research limitations/implications** – Being a theory-based exploration, the paper does not provide empirical examples of how this theory might be applied in practice.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides an example of a dynamic theory, introduces the concept of Theta and Lambda worldviews and provides a better definition of leadership strategy and tactics.

**Keywords** Leadership, Leadership development

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Scholars tend to hold two mutually exclusive views about leadership: one school of thought holds that leaders are born (Grint, 2000, Nietzsche, 1969) and that the qualities they embody are subconscious (Lowen, 1975), while the other posits that humans need to work hard to develop these qualities before they can emerge as leaders (Henrikson, 2006; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999; Kakabadse and Myers, 1996).

The "great man" theory (Carlyle, 2007; James, 1880) exemplifies the former view and is interested in the personality traits which leaders intrinsically possess (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999). This approach assumes that a "great man" naturally holds the essential skills which allow him to perform as a leader. By identifying these essential traits, others can emulate them through simulated versions of leadership (Lawler, 2005). When applying this approach, scholars analyse specific tasks or problems and



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provide leadership typologies for addressing them (Mullins, 2003; Hersey and Blanchard, 1993; Bass and Avolio, 1990). Many scholars have explored the behaviour of leaders, the impact of context or “situation” on leadership (Yukl, 2006), the function of leadership (Shamir, 1995), as well as “contingency” and dynamic processes (Baker, 2007; Fiedler, 1967). Both the behavioural perspective as well as the economic model examine leadership as a role whose purpose is to assist an organization to adapt. That is how an individual practicing leadership can help an organisation to affect adaptive change (Kotter, 1990; Heifetz, 1998; Nanus, 1995).

The developmental school of thought, on the other hand, seeks to understand the conscious steps taken to become a leader. Rooted in existentialist phenomenology, it holds that human development as well as human history is created (i.e. “caused”) by our awareness of our own mortality (i.e. existential “time”) which shapes everyday lives as a continuous interpretation of experience of the past and expectation (i.e. “anticipation”) of the future (Koselleck, 1985, 2002). In this case, personal life “is a constant becoming through a constant intentionality of development” (MacDonald, 2000, p.33), and human existence is centred on the idea of possibility where “he is always more than he is; his being is never complete at any given moment” (Sartre, 1973, p. 32). This view suggests that articulations of one’s experience and anticipation of the future are subject to interpretation and evolve over time (Nanus, 1995; MacDonald, 2000). The developmental school holds that leadership is grounded in experience and reflected by the personal interpretation of specific meanings articulated by inconsistent uses of language (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999). These, in turn, influence the development of future perspectives (Alvesson and Svenningson, 2003). Although scholars argue that leaders should exhibit some needed personal qualities (e.g. Goleman, 1998; Kotter, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977), the above list does not offer a comprehensive theory of what leadership entails, especially when these leadership qualities are not found in practice. Moreover, notwithstanding burgeoning academic endeavours in the field of leadership, we still do not know why leadership calls for those qualities. However, our goal is not simply to criticise existing views on leadership. Instead, we take leadership to be a process (Baker, 2007) and present here a dynamic theory of leadership which refers to time (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). This theory will enable us to explain the process of leadership development, explaining that the two opinions concerning leadership transformations are not at odds but complement each other. In addition, we will not only identify the gaps in the existing literature and attempt to fill them, but also assess the relevance of the current literature.

We will develop our argument starting with some basics, first by explaining the theoretical meaning of leadership and its application in practice. Next, we will examine some of the leadership qualities recognised by the literature as a context for arguing that the full embodiment of this list of qualities is beyond human reach. Consequently, we will expand on what leaders do in practice. We will introduce the two mutually exclusive worldviews of leaders, the Theta and the Lambda, from which leaders can choose and the three levels of activity of leadership theory. We will follow this discussion by introducing the concept of ideal leadership and then presenting a dynamic model of leadership theory. Leaders are few and not many are ready to face the challenges expected in this role. We will identify those challenges. Finally, we will explain why leadership theory, which seems to be relevant to only a few of us, is actually meaningful to us all.

### The theory of leadership

Adding to Kurt Lewin's (1945) observation that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory", Whetten (2002) suggests that only a good theory is practical. Hence, we have two successive goals:

- (1) we should understand the components that comprise theory; and
- (2) we should incorporate this knowledge into the theory of leadership.

Like any theory, leadership theory has to answer to three key questions – what, why and how (Whetten, 2002). "What" refers to the constructs analysed, or the target of theorising; "how" explains the methods we use to create interrelationships between constructs of the theory; and "why" represents the conceptual assumptions behind these relationships (Figure 1).

Thus, in leadership theory the "what" represents the goal that the leader looks to attain, the "how" explains the way the leader reaches the goal, and the "why" explains the reasons behind selecting this particular method for attaining the goal. However, we contend that while the literature into leadership deals with what leaders do or how they do it, it is silent about the reasons for why leaders are motivated to pursue such activities. This paper seeks to address this gap in leadership theory. However, for forwarding our explanation, we will first critically review a selection of the literature into leadership that we will use as a context to our discussion.

#### *The leadership timeline*

In general, research into leadership has examined three different phases within the leadership timeline: the past, the present, and the future. Respectively, they represent how leaders have been transformed, their social role, and how they identify and execute their purpose. As Figure 2 shows, the model is in line with Koselleck (1985, 2002), and it defines and captures human development fuelled by the vision of possibilities.



Source: Mostovicz (2008)

Figure 1.  
The three components of theory

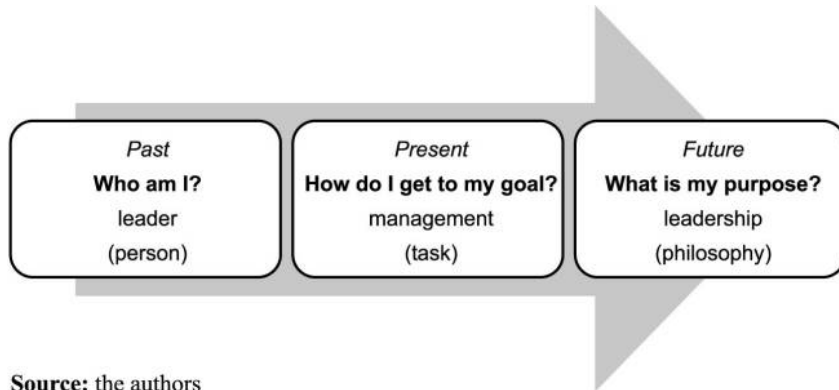


Figure 2.  
The leader's timeline

*The past*

Who is the leader or what qualities do ideal leadership require? One quality of a leader is self-awareness (Goleman, 1998, p. 84), which we define as “having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives”. By this definition, leaders should also understand their own values and goals in order to express themselves accurately and openly. This suggests that good leaders are able to clearly articulate their deepest emotions and life goals, a feat which psychological research suggests people find difficult (Niemeyer *et al.*, 2001). Equally, people tend to incorrectly define their perceptions as “truth”, which leads to emotional distortion (Mostovicz *et al.*, 2008).

Individuals express a difference in their thinking and actions, as shown in the gap between what they say (“espoused theory”) and what they actually do (“theory in use”) (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Hence, the “deep understanding of one’s emotions” (Goleman, 1998, p. 84) is never deep enough to bridge the gap between his intellectual understanding and his ability to apply this emotional learning, since emotions are embedded in the subconscious. In his uprooting of traditional Western viewpoints on the subject, Freud (1948) concluded that the subconscious determines personal preferences rather than the consciously pursued intellectual efforts. Freud’s challenge also laid the foundation for a wider debate within intellectual circles of the psychological origins of personal development (Lesser, 1957).

Besides lacking in self-awareness, humans also cannot act responsibly at all times as there will always be some areas or times when we act automatically or hide behind rules and customs (Mostovicz and Kakabadse, 2008). Consequently, we cannot expect leaders who at times are unaware of their actions to act ethically. The inability led some researchers to realise that while true ethics is beyond our perception, we can gain better insight by developing dynamic models of flux (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Scholars who view ethics as a process rather than an end (e.g. Ciulla, 2004a, b; Caldwell *et al.*, 2008; Flynn, 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Liedtka, 2008; Verbos *et al.*, 2007) pay attention to the deep, personally held virtues, which generally relate to flourishing, vital, meaningful life-purposes and their embodiment (Cameron, 2003; Manz *et al.*, 2006; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Weiner, 1993). Scholars (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Yammarino *et al.*, 2008) who argue for the need to develop authentic leadership – Liedtka (2008), for example – call for a search for authenticity by looking internally (Hernandez, 2008; Hardt, 1993) rather than externally as logical,

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economics-driven theories of ethics advocate. Lévinas (1994) addresses this question by replacing the concept of authenticity with the idea of responsibility to the “Other” as the ultimate ethical value.

### *The present*

The present refers to the social environment inside which a leader acts. A trait commonly found in leaders is empathy. Goleman (1988, p. 88) defines empathy as “the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people” and “the skill of treating people according to their emotional reactions”. To empathise means to respect the other’s goals and motives. But because leaders are unclear about their own values and purpose, their ability to empathise with those of others is equally constrained.

While Goleman (1988, p. 88) identifies self-regulation, or “the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods and the propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting”, this supposed self-regulation or the ability to control emotions and think logically is, at best, wishful thinking, since this introjected, non-autonomous self-regulation is inauthentic (Ryan and Brown, 2003). Thus, we not only are unable to control our subconscious but also the impacts that our subconscious has on our actions (Ariely, 2008).

### *The future*

Humans need a purpose. As each person has his own individual personality, he therefore searches for a unique purpose (Frankl, 1963). This assertion, so basic to Judaism, claims that “the foundation of Judaism and the basis of all true religions is the realization that existence is purposeful, and that man has a purpose in life” (Kaplan, 1979, p. 1), and it is recognised nowadays by cognitive psychologists as well (e.g. Deci and Ryan, 2000; Pinker, 2003). While we cannot attain true purpose, man is aware that he has a purpose and should search for it (Frankl, 1963). Hence, contrary to Mills (2003), who claims that this search for meaning is only a means for dealing with uncertainty, theorists perceive searching for a purpose (e.g., Frankl, 1963; Kelly, 1955; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Yamakage, 2000) as a goal.

However, people tend to believe in their ability of reaching a purpose out of fear of imperfection (Pinker, 2003), resulting in frustration when they realise that they cannot attain the purpose. This leads to the development of noögenic[1] neuroses, or what others might call spiritual or existential neuroses (Frankl, 1963). They shed all striving for meaning and live a boring and meaningless life. Another prevailing option is to substitute the unattainable purpose with a reachable one, such as the “American dream” (Adams, 2001), which only delays the neurosis until people reach this attainable but wrong purpose.

Focusing on the search for purpose as a goal requires maturity, one of the most important qualities of a leader (Zaleznik, 1977). Just as marathon runners are usually older than those who run short distances, leaders’ applied abilities improve with age because they have stronger mental stamina. Similarly, marathon runners have to struggle with an invisible target that does not become visible for some time. Therefore, they run unconsciously (Frankl, 1975) and concern themselves less with the target and more with their own actions until the target begins to reveal itself.

Another trait which virtually all leaders have is motivation. Goleman (1998, p. 88) defines motivation as a “passion to work for reasons that go beyond money and status” and “a propensity to pursue a goal with energy and persistence.” However, how can

leaders “pursue a goal” when their purpose is unclear? Second, self-motivation is an ideal only as in reality, one needs a measure of extrinsic provocation (Gagné and Deci, 2005). As a matter of fact, those who fail to grasp this human inability to pursue a goal end up trying or thinking too hard and develop neuroses as a result (Frankl, 1963; Wilson and Schooler, 1991).

### What do leaders do?

If most of the leadership qualities mentioned above seem not to exist in reality, aspiring leaders may remain unaware of how to progress in their development. Literature has paid less attention to the role of leadership and instead has concentrated more on how leaders are fulfilling that role. Hence, we need to answer three questions: first, what the role of leadership is, second, what the role of nonexistent ideal leadership in practice is and lastly, what the role of all the traits that the literature into leadership identified in developing leaders is.

Leadership is about making choices (Kouzes and Posner, 2003). Choice is a binary action that divides options into two sets, the desired and the undesired ones, according to a higher principle or value (Rawls, 1999). Thus, a choice implies that while both options are equally valid, one will choose according to a higher principle. Mostovicz (2008) posits that the way people choose is a reflection of their worldview or the way they go about discovering their “ideal self” (Hinkle, 1965). We approach this discovery in one of two ways:

- (1) by the need for achievement (the Lambda worldview); or
- (2) by the need for affiliation (the Theta worldview).

Each worldview has its unique characteristics. While the Thetas’ motivation is socially oriented and they look to affiliate with their society of choice (Pyszczynski *et al.* 2004; Pyszczynski *et al.*, 1997), the Lambdas are individually motivated (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Consequently, their respective behaviour follows the fundamental modalities of human existence (Bakan, 1966). Thetas’ behaviour is toward communion and focused on other people and relationships while Lambdas’ behaviour is toward agency and focused on the self and autonomy. The different approaches seek different benefits. Thetas try to build respect within their society of choice while Lambdas look for personal freedom (Mostovicz, 2008). While scholars argue that leaders should exhibit the personal quality of authenticity (e.g. Goleman, 1998; Kotter, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977), Thetas and Lambdas differ in the way they relate to authenticity. While Thetas are concerned with truthfulness and denounce fakes (Ciulla, 2004a, b; Nanus, 1995; Pyszczynski *et al.*, 1997, 2004), Lambdas “are genuine and authentic, not a replica of someone else” (George *et al.*, 2007, p. 129) and perceive authenticity as uniqueness, with negative views of a “me too” practice (Bennis, 2004; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Brown, 2003).

Finally, the different worldviews have different ideas about what a true goal is. According to Kaplan (1990), one relates to truth either as an objective or as a principle. If one relates to truth as an objective, the goal is to unite with it, as the Thetas perceive. If, on the other hand, one relates to truth as a principle, as a Lambda does, truth then creates a set of challenges or guidelines to live up to. This difference in perception of truth also explains why different opinions exist about how leaders transform (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999). To a Theta, a true leader is one who attained his objective or one who is able to act subconsciously (Lowen, 1975) and naturally – a born

leader (Grint, 2000; Nietzsche, 1969) while for a Lambda, a genuine leader is one who follows meticulously a proper set of guidelines (Henrikson, 2006; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999; Kakabadse and Myers, 1996).

These two approaches clash fundamentally because the drive for achievement ends in separating oneself from others (or making oneself unique), while its counterpart seeks to affiliate oneself with others and work in unison. Consequently, this tension can lead to personal bias or a distortion of the paradox within leadership (Mostovicz *et al.*, 2008). A Theta type tends to choose the alternative course of action whereby he dilutes the stakes by substituting a relative truthfulness for the ultimate truth or creates a lack of contrast by removing a strongly desired choice. On the other hand, in the Lambda type, the learning paradox can cause one to lose his own personality and to seek collectivism or even fanaticism in extreme cases whereby one disrespects others' interpretation of truth or argues that it is invalid (McGregor *et al.*, 1998; see Frankl, 1986, p. xxvi for a similar idea). Table I outlines several of the characteristics which define these two worldviews and how they approach their practice of leadership.

Incorporating both approaches is paradoxical because this requires one to relate to the other despite being motivated in a different way (Mostovicz *et al.*, 2008). This paradox creates an ethical problem because it implies that the leader is supposed to view a clashing code of conduct as both a proper and a good conduct yet also as unethical. Moreover, it begs the question of how one can perceive two opposing conducts as equally ethical.

Hence, leadership consists of three levels (Table II). The lower level consists of the many tactics or actions (Amir and Ariely, 2007) that are based on the Theta/Lambda principles. As such, these actions are logical, rational, conscious, measurable and replicable, and their guiding discipline is economics. Strategy is a matter of interpretation and often involves the making of choices (Porter, 1996), which are themselves paradoxical

	Theta	Lambda
Motivation/reason	Socially oriented	Personally oriented
Goal	Seeking unity and certainty	Seeking challenge and creation
Behaviour	Communion	Agency
Benefit	Building respect	Looking for personal freedom
Leadership principle	Authenticity = truthfulness	Authenticity = genuineness
Inclination	Toward choice	Toward contrast
Perception of truth	As an objective	As a set of rules
Transformation of a leader	A leader is born. Qualities are subconscious	A leader is developed consciously

**Table I.**  
Leadership characteristics of Theta and Lambda worldviews

Theory question	How?	What?	Why?
Organisational component	Tactics	Strategy	Leadership
Leading discipline	Economics	Psychology	Metaphysics
Type of action	Logical, measurable and replicable. Conscious	Emotional, a matter of choice. Subconscious	Does not exist

**Table II.**  
The three components of leadership theory



(Mostovicz *et al.*, 2008). This is the level of practical leadership that we characterise as emotional, unconscious, irrational and immeasurable and whose guiding discipline is psychology. However, this level is properly performed only when it is embedded in true purpose and its leading discipline is of metaphysics. While man cannot perceive truth, he is able to progress toward it. Nevertheless, he has to progress naturally and faithfully according to his worldview, which can be of a Theta or a Lambda type.

### The dynamic theory of leadership development

Recently, scholars have criticised theories in social science for being static (Ashforth *et al.* 2008) or for not taking into account the element of time. Theories that scholars considered correct in the past have become invalid over time (Pascale, 1990; Kalogeras, 2005). Consequently, social science in general and the process of leadership (Baker, 2007) in particular are looking for dynamic theories.

Ideal leadership and ethics share one thing in common: neither the former nor the latter is to be found in man. Nevertheless, as such, they present an ideal for anchoring leadership theory. Weber (1947) and Hekman (1983) use the term “ideal” only as an aid to assist in explaining patterns of social interaction, institutional design and the way we govern ourselves (Cutting and Kouzmin, 2000). Hence, “ideal” does not try to describe a particular behaviour but looks to capture the logic of reality we use meaningfully as an inspirational benchmark. We expand beyond this normative approach and view the ideal type or the ethical leader as a particular entity and argue that this ideal is not a passive and static benchmark for measuring our success, but an active and dynamic part of the leadership theory. Unable to reach the ideal, the pursuit of ideal leadership is guaranteed to fail, yet it assures the dynamic and successful development of the leader.

While the metaphysical ideal serves as an anchor for guaranteeing a leader’s dynamic development, a leader gets closer to that ideal either by following the Theta or the Lambda pattern according to his worldview. Nevertheless, we must express this worldview in tactical actions that fit (Porter, 1996) the particular worldview (Figure 3).

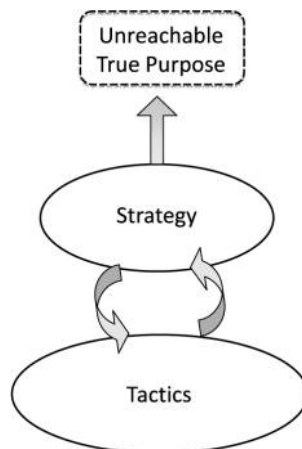


Figure 3.  
The dynamic theory of leadership development

Source: the authors

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However, as we will explain, tactics have a dual role. Not only do we use them as a means of expression of the leader's strategy, but as a mirror that reflects the bitter truth to the leader, telling him what he is not doing properly.

We believe that the selection of our tactical goals is based on logic. Nevertheless, Porter (1996) reminds us that we should not account for all actions since these actions should fit our strategic view. According to this approach, the tactical goals are the independent variables that dictate to us what to do while the strategic view helps us to select those goals more suitable to our capabilities. Inherently, this approach suffers from what might be called "objectivity fallacy", or the belief that we are able to collect data or define tactical goals objectively. However, we select subjectively only the data that fits our worldview (Mostovicz, 2008; Mostovicz *et al.*, 2008). Thus, the tactical activities are dependent variables only. Hence, leadership development starts with clarifying the emotional, strategic worldview first before defining those tactical methods that can enhance the strategy.

### The leadership challenge

Why are there so few leaders? In Kakabadse and Kakabadse's (2007) study, only a handful of people in leadership positions actually led, while the vast majority acted reactively, either seeing their role as pleasing the shareholders or being concerned with their reputation. Not only were there not enough leaders to fill existing leadership slots in management, but the gaps are even greater as some leaders decline to practise their leadership in the field of business management (Goffee and Jones, 2000). The result is that filling these leadership roles is a huge challenge.

Leadership calls for total commitment to the perpetual process of purpose seeking. While leaders are usually concerned with their legacies, their commitment to purpose has to go far deeper. It is not simply how a leader has lived his life but how he has defined a purpose for which he would have been ready to die if it could not have been pursued (Lévinas, 1994). This total commitment implies that, in reality, leaders seek "either my way or nothing". However, this commitment is intrinsic; it calls for the leader to mobilise himself, body and soul, but in no way does it imply extrinsically that what is not "my way" is wrong.

This total commitment is not easy. The only tool left at the leader's disposal is motivation, which implies flux. A leader should be constantly on the move, trying to achieve the unachievable and relating to what looks like a means as a life goal. However, as this motivation is always extrinsically triggered (Gagné and Deci, 2005), it does not happen regularly, and a good leader should seek that extrinsic motivation constantly and even provoke it (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

A leader faces a challenge at the strategic level as well. It is not enough to pursue a goal and a leader has to follow it strictly according to his worldview while respecting the other's worldview. This respect of the other is empathy or what Lorenz (1974) calls a bond associated with being both non-hierarchical and non-distancing. When leaders bond socially, they need to send a message that humans all share a common existence and a lack of self-awareness of the ethics required to search for a true purpose. While establishing empathy is a momentary act based on a complex unconscious process (Wilson, 2002), leaders are aware of this but try to unmask it or try to be more aware of themselves.

Empathy requires three qualities:  
(1) avoidance of distancing;  
(2) respect for the integrity of the other; and  
(3) harmonious aggression (Ohshima, 1998).

We can only achieve harmony by setting boundaries around the aggressive act while signalling respect for the adversary's integrity (Funakoshi, 1973). This ability to manage a spectrum of aggression may not be unique to humans. As Lorenz (1974) has pointed out, members of a given animal species also find it important to keep their aggression intact and to learn to avoid potentially dangerous repercussions by means of diverting mechanisms.

However, proper empathy or being ethical is trying to hold the stick at both ends and tends to lead to paradoxical distortion (Mostovicz *et al.*, 2008) that the leader needs to fight constantly. Empathy is the reconciliation between the closeness of responsibility and the distancing as defined by the Other (Lévinas, 1994). We can only strive to reach this ideal but we will never attain it.

Finally, the tactical level has its challenges as well. While an organisation has one leader only to dictate its future direction, many fall into the trap of transactional leadership, where they base their leadership on formal authority (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999). Such behaviour is based on the logic of self-regulation, while leadership should be based on a voluntary emotional concession of any competing goals by others in the organisation (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991). Thus, instead of mistakenly marginalising individual experience in the search for overall homogeneity, a leader should learn to "play through" (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991) any differences that individuals may have so that he does not deny "the right of individual people to have and interpret their own experience" (Cheng, 1995, p. 5).

### Conclusion

Ideal leaders do not exist in practice. Thus, we can relate to leadership as a progressive development only. Since humans cannot be fully conscious of our emotions, *a posteriori*, we cannot fully mobilise them in order to understand and attain our life goals and purpose. Because our purpose remains opaque at best, it follows that leaders will act unethically even when they do so unwillingly or unconsciously. The only way for leaders to improve their ethical position is to interact with others in society to help them reveal their hidden agenda over time. The particular worldview, in turn, shapes these agendas, either Theta or Lambda, that a person embodies in his search for greater self-awareness and contextualisation with his external environment.

### Note

1. *Noös* is Greek for mind or spirit.

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#### Corresponding author

E. Isaac Mostovicz can be contacted at: isaac@janusthinking.com

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