



Mary Parker Follett: visionary leadership and strategic management

McLarney, C; Rhyno, Shelley. **Women in Management Review** 14.7 (1999): 292-302.

Hide highlighting

Show duplicate items from other databases

▣ Abstract (summary)

The main purpose of this paper is to use the theory of visionary leadership proposed by Frances Westley and Henry Mintzberg as an analytic tool to understand a Follettian view of leaders and leadership. One will see that Miss Follett's views on who a leader is and what a leader does fall quite closely in line with Westley and Mintzberg's theory. The paper will begin with a review of Westley and Mintzberg's theory of visionary leadership. It will continue with a discussion of how Miss Follett's views of leadership fit well within the framework of Westley and Mintzberg. The next section will show the gaps between Westley and Mintzberg's theory and Miss Follett's. The final part of the paper will investigate the implications for practical applications of these visions of leadership.

▣ Full Text | Turn on search term navigation

C. McLarney: C. McLarney is an Assistant Professor in the School of Business Administration, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Shelley Rhyno: Shelley Rhyno is Managing Director of Pracadem Associates, Bloomington, Illinois, USA.

Mary Parker Follett was a writer, political analyst, social activist, philosopher, lecturer, colleague and friend. She was born in the small Puritan town of Quincy, Massachusetts, in 1868. She lived through a time of great change in the USA. Increased urbanisation and spreading industrialisation translated into enormous social change both in the workplace and in the home.

It was not the age of the feminist, but somehow Mary Parker Follett penetrated the inner sanctum of some of the world's leading organisations (Rowntree's of the UK and Dennison's of the USA, to name two). She observed and commented on the workings of these organisations. Her many publications can be best described as commentaries. She cannot be correctly called a theorist for she did not expound any theories only comments. She wrote extensively on leaders and leadership, but did not formulate any formal theories about them.

In order to comprehend fully Miss Follett's enormous contribution to strategic management we need to construct a framework to analyse her works. We can either create a framework of our own or we can use an established framework as a tool. The advantage of using an established framework is that it has already been confirmed as being useful. Thus it frees the authors from expending a lot of time and energy "proving" their framework and allows them to concentrate on the task at hand, using the framework as a tool. This paper proposes the use of the model developed by Frances Westley and Henry Mintzberg in their paper "Visionary leadership and strategic management". This will allow us to organise Miss Follett's work in order to more fully understand its ramifications to strategic management.

The use of Westley and Mintzberg's framework will serve many purposes. First it will finally organise a great body of work on leaders and leadership by Miss Follett. Her publications on leadership date from 1898 to 1933. This framework will allow us to coalesce these diverse publications into a coherent "theory" of leadership. The use of the framework will also expose any gaps in Miss Follett's views on leadership. Finally, the model will force us to see the implications of Miss Follett's views for practitioners.

The main purpose of this paper is to use the theory of "visionary leadership" proposed by Frances Westley and Henry Mintzberg as an analytic tool to understand a Follettian view of leaders and leadership. One will see that Miss Follett's views on who a leader is and what a leader does fall quite closely in line with Westley and Mintzberg's theory. The paper will begin with a review of Westley and Mintzberg's theory of "visionary leadership". It will continue with a discussion of how Miss Follett's views of leadership fit well within the framework of Westley and Mintzberg. The next section will show the gaps between Westley and Mintzberg's theory and Miss Follett's. The final part of the paper will investigate the implications for practical applications of these "visions" of leadership.

Westley and Mintzberg's "visionary leadership"

The 1989 paper by Frances Westley and Henry Mintzberg entitled "Visionary leadership and strategic management" proposed that: "... visionary leadership is

a dynamic, interactive phenomenon, as opposed to a unidirectional process. Second, we must assume that the study of strategic vision must take into consideration strategic content as well as the strategic contexts of product, market, issue, process, and organisation. Third, we assume that visionary style can take on a variety of different forms (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 18)."

These three basic assumptions made by Westley and Mintzberg will form the basis of the analysis of Miss Follett's work. We will now examine each assumption in more detail.

Dynamic nature of visionary leadership

The first assumption speaks about the dynamic nature of visionary leadership. Westley and Mintzberg suggest using the metaphor of a drama to describe the process of visionary leadership. Their idea is embodied in the model shown in Figure 1.

In the presence of a drama, action and communication occur simultaneously. The actor and audience, and the idea and the action are all united in the unfolding drama. It all starts with repetition, here the actor develops an excellent working knowledge of the subject. We can think of this as learning the "craft" of strategising. For the strategic visionary this means that: "... strategic perception (is developed) as much through practice and gut-level feel for the business, product, market, and technology, as through conscious cognition" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 18)."

Therefore we can say that just as the actor rehearses for the moment they step on stage, the visionary leader practices for the moment of vision.

The second stage in the model is representation, which can be described as the moment when repetition moves into performance. Here the actor transforms the rehearsals into successes. For the strategic visionary this translates into getting their followers to see and feel the leader's vision. It is through their words and actions that the visionary leaders communicate their vision, and: "... how the vision is communicated thus becomes as important as what is communicated (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p.19)."

The way the strategic visionary communicates moves well beyond the realm of language and linguistic devices. It also includes a range of dramaturgical devices such as timing, gestures, glances, movement, and props. The visionary leader creates a vision which forms a bridge between the leader and the followers and between the idea and the action.

The final stage in the process is assistance, which can be best described as audience participation. For an actor to make a performance a success they require an audience, and the same can be said of the strategic visionary. The visionary turns **strategy** into vision by the interaction with their followers. Here the leader and the follower create the vision together. It is this notion of a shared vision that sets strategic visionaries apart from other strategists. Just as an actor creates a Gestalt during a performance, the visionary creates a whole, a cohesiveness which drives and transforms the leader as well as the followers: "... thus the visionary leader not only empowers his audience; it also empowers him (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p.21)."

From this process we can see that the essence of timing which is crucial to an actor is also of paramount importance to the visionary leader for: "Only at the right time with the right leader and the right audience can **strategy** become vision and leadership become visionary (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p.22)."

Strategic context and strategic content

The second assumption made by Westley and Mintzberg involves both the content as well as the context of strategic vision. The vision itself may focus on organisations, markets, products or even services, and this is termed the strategic content and forms the core of the vision. The context creates the external influences on the vision. The focus of the vision may be the organisation, but the nature of that organisation itself can have many variations in terms of structure, ownership, size, etc..

Varieties of visionary style

The final assumption puts forth the idea that strategic visionaries come in many shapes and forms. Westley and Mintzberg propose that visionary style comes in many packages: "... visionary leadership can vary importantly from leader to leader ... style of the leader may vary, as may the content of the leader's vision and the context in which it takes root (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 30)."

From this we can see that strategic vision involves a style, a process, the content and the context. The strategic visionary is a product of all these. They are the offspring of their followers, their timing, and the opportunities present: "They are the product of the historical moment (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 30)."

In sum, we see that Westley and Mintzberg's theory of visionary leadership is based on three assumptions: dynamism, context/content, and variety. These three assumptions underpin their repetition/representation/ assistance model. Their theory will provide a valuable framework for our analysis of Mary Parker Follett's work.

Mary Parker Follett on leadership

Mary Parker Follett wrote extensively on the subject of leadership. Leadership in her neighbourhood groups, in her community and in politics. She expressed a belief in the power and potential of the groups and leaders of these groups. Much of her work reflected a Gestalt psychology and a view of the evolving whole. For Mary Parker Follett, leadership involved understanding the whole group and each individual member. She felt that the leader must be able to see the potentialities of each group member, must be able to coax them out, and then integrate each member's capabilities to create a coherent whole. The leader must unite the group and bring out their common purpose. They must then guide the group to that common goal. At the same time, the leader is also a group member, so they have a responsibility and obligation to group membership as well.

If we now examine Miss Follett's work on leadership with the assistance of the theory of visionary leadership posited by Westley and Mintzberg, we can begin to understand her views better. As was mentioned at the beginning of the paper we will use the three basic assumptions of Westley and Mintzberg to analyse Miss Follett's work.

Assumption one: dynamic and interactive nature of leadership

We can recall that in the discussion in the above section, that Westley and Mintzberg (1989) suggested the dynamic and interactive model for leadership shown in Figure 2.

If we now turn to Miss **Follett**'s works, we can see how this model is reflected in much of her writing. The vast majority of her work was at the level of the group. While she spoke about leaders as individuals, it was in the context of the group that she felt the true power of the leader was realised. For Westley and Mintzberg it is in the context of the performance that the visionary leader is most effective. The interactive nature of leadership forms the basis of the first assumption of Westley and Mintzberg's theory and it also permeates Miss **Follett**'s views.

She felt that it was here, in the group, that any one can be a leader if they possess the necessary competencies for the current circumstances. It is also within the group that the leader guides and is simultaneously guided. Not only does the group's leader steer them, but he/she also is steered by the group itself. There is a reciprocity at work within the group. The leader is influenced by the group and because of that influence he/she in turn influences the group in a certain manner. Miss **Follett** termed this a "circular response" (**Follett**, 1927a, p. 159). The influence, or current, flows both ways. In looking at groups, one needs to study both the group and the leader, and one should "think not only of what the leader does to the group, but also of what the group does to the leader" (**Follett**, 1930a, p. 213). The group's norms and values, as determined by the whole group, have an affect **on** the entire group including the leader. Therefore, the leader will need to work within these norms and values when guiding the group.

If we now break Westley and Mintzberg's model down into its component parts, we can see how Miss **Follett**'s views **on** leadership work within the model.

Repetition

The first element of the model is repetition, which roughly translates into a working knowledge of the subject matter. We can recall that Westley and Mintzberg (1989) stated that repetition is the stage where the strategic visionary develops a familiarity with the issues. The ideas of familiarity and working knowledge are reflected in Mary **Parker Follett**'s works.

Miss **Follett** stated that leaders require an extensive understanding of the group and the community, the internal and the external, the two environments in which the group is working. It has two sets of relations, "its internal relations and its external relations" (**Follett**, 1930a, p. 230). The leader must be able to integrate the two for the group to be effective. The successful group has been able to harmonise its internal environment with its external environment. The leader has been able to direct the group to this harmony. Leadership in this situation is neither democratic nor autocratic, but is something superior to either. It is based **on** "functional unity" (**Follett**, 1930a, p. 214), and integration. Thus, neither faction can claim superiority. The leader is able to integrate the factions and unite their differences.

Representation

Turning to the second element of the model, representation, we remember that this is the communication of the vision to the followers/audience. Here the visionary leader (actor) invites the followers (audience) into the performance. Westley and Mintzberg (1989) suggest that this is the stage where the vision is revealed. In essence it is when the visionary leader gives words to the vision and reveals it to the followers. Turning to the works of Miss **Follett** we find that representation forms the basis for much of her writing.

Mary **Parker Follett** wrote that the leader is the one who can inject energy into the group (audience), who can inspire, and who can direct the actions of the group. Once the members of the team (members of the audience) are energised and have a sense of direction, it is then the leader's function to maintain these energies and direction. The group cannot rest **on** its laurels or it will quickly become irrelevant. If we apply Westley and Mintzberg's (1989) framework we see that what Miss **Follett** describes is the representation stage. Like the actor **on** the stage, Miss **Follett** felt that the leader must create an "energising force (in the) progressing enterprise" (**Follett**, 1933, p. 57). Also like the Westley and Mintzberg's visionary leader, Miss **Follett**'s leader should be constantly searching for new approaches, new problems, new solutions and new leaders. The visionary leader is continually looking for a new way of communicating the vision.

If we look at where leaders represent we find that it can be anywhere. It is the communicating of the vision that is important, not where. However, every good actor knows how to set their stage for the most effective performance. Therefore every good visionary leader knows the best playing field for their followers. For Miss **Follett** it is within the environment of the small group that leaders are most effective. The neighbourhood group provides the right environment for everyone to have the chance to become a leader. She states:"In your neighbourhood group show the clearness of your mind, the strength of your grip, your power to elicit and guide co-operative action, and you emerge as the leader of men (**Follett**, 1918, p. 228)."

If we look at the example of a chief executive officer (CEO) of a corporation as an example of a leader, then there are certain functions which they perform which may shed some light **on** the understanding of leadership. According to Miss **Follett**, the CEO performs three main functions: defines the organisation's purpose, co-ordinates its activities, and anticipates its future. In translating that to the group, the leader gives the group its purpose, pulls together all the efforts of the team, and has a long range vision. In all of this the leader is the integrator of all the points of view, all the divergent interests and all the differences of opinion. This is the potency of leadership, it is "the power of integrating ... which creates community" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 229).

Westley and Mintzberg speak about the need for the visionary leader to "allow their listeners to 'see' the visions as if they were real" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 20). This can be expanded to say that the visionary leader must also let their listeners see the whole of the vision. In other words, the leader (actor) allows the audience to see how this scene fits into the entire play. For Miss **Follett** the leader must also be able to see "the relation of the immediate purpose to the larger purpose" (**Follett**, 1930a, p. 226). He/she must be able to pay attention to the details of the group's activities and at the same time keep an eye **on** the future. In that way he/she will always be able to tell if the group is moving towards its goals.

If we think in terms of a corporation, the CEO should "always be able to summarise the purposes of the company and say how far the company is reaching them and how far not" (**Follett**, 1930a, p. 227). For Miss **Follett** it is very important for the leader or CEO to keep the group's activities **on** track. It is quite easy to pay too much attention to the details and realise too late that all the efforts of the group have been for nothing. The leader must make sure that the vision is being communicated properly so the audience really is able to "see" it. Thus they must evaluate the activities of the group and determine if they fit

into the overall **strategy** of the group.

The visionary leader is able to "inspire the audience to create a living Gestalt" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 19). This idea of a whole is crucial to a performance and critical to a visionary leader. Miss **Follett** echoes these sentiments in her views on leadership and decision making. She wrote that it is the leader who is able to bring the various members of the group to a mutual understanding. He/she is able to point out the value in each position and helps the group members to see the merit in each other's perspectives. The leader is able to look at each member's viewpoint, understand their experience and then pull together the experiences of the group into a coherent whole. Then he/she orders that experience so that it can be useful for the group. By doing this the leader is able to harness the power of the group, "by organising experience ... we transform experience into power" (**Follett**, 1933, p. 223). They then direct that power to solving problems.

She also felt that it is the responsibility of the team leader to organise the varying contributions, experiences, capabilities, talents, and temperaments of the group members. Only by doing this can the group move forward with a purpose. The leader unites the group under the banner of the "common purpose", and by doing this is able to "create a group power" (**Follett**, 1930b, p. 248). According to Miss **Follett**, the best type of leader is the one who is able to create group power from many diverse, and sometimes antagonistic, elements. He/she is somehow able to "transform experience into power" (**Follett**, 1933, p. 52).

In terms of business organisations, the true leader is able to convert the talents and capabilities of their team to increase organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Miss **Follett** states that: "The power of our corporations depends upon this capability of men to interknit themselves into such genuine relations that a new personality is thereby evolved (**Follett**, 1918, pp. 8-9)."

From the second stage of the model, representation, we continue in our quest to more fully understand Miss **Follett**'s views on leadership. This stage is the moment of performance. It is the fruit of repetition. For Miss **Follett**, this is the moment of action and is the result of a thorough working knowledge of the issues. It is here that the leader is able to inspire the group, pull them together, and reveal the "vision". The leader uses all his/her talents to be able to communicate the purpose or vision of the group. They also keep the group on track to achieve the goal. In dramaturgical terms, the visionary leader maintains the continuity of the play and draws together the actors and the audience into the realm of the imagination.

Assistance

The final element of the model is assistance, which is the interaction between the strategic visionary and their audience. For Westley and Mintzberg, this is the first time the audience has an active role to play. It is in this stage that the followers (audience) truly share in the vision of the leader. The leader and the followers "participate together in creating the vision" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 21). Assistance also implies reciprocity, in that "... the visionary leader not only empowers his audience; it also empowers him" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 21). For Mary **Parker Follett**, assistance is the essence of her views on leaders and leadership. Throughout her works she mentions the power of the group and how it enables the leader to lead. She speaks of the leader as being integral to the group just as Westley and Mintzberg speak of the difference between actor and audience as a "practical one".

Miss **Follett** believed that the leader is not external to the group, but rather works within the confines of the group. She stated that this way the leader is continuously reminded of the group's goals and not tempted to follow his/her own personal goals. It is "within the group these two loyalties can merge" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 229). The leader leads from within. For Miss **Follett** it is only from within that he/she can truly see what the cause means to each member of the group. Only from within that he/she can determine the varying interests of the group members. Only from within that the leader can harmonise any conflicting interests. And only from within can he/she reconcile these interests to the cause. "... the leader of our neighbourhood group must interpret our experience to us, must see all the different points of view which underlie our daily activities and also their connections, must adjust the varying and often conflicting needs, must lead the group to an understanding of its needs and to a unification of its purpose (**Follett**, 1918, p. 229)."

The result of all this then is group power. The leader creates power through the intermingling of all the different abilities of the group members. He/she is able to integrate these different capabilities to create a single driving force. From this emerges a unified team.

Miss **Follett** viewed membership in a team as also having a responsibility. You have certain obligations if you are to be a true member of the team. Like the audience of Westley and Mintzberg, team members are required to participate in order for the performance to be effective. This involves giving your total contribution, not holding anything back. This naturally means that you cannot be passive and sit back and watch in a team atmosphere: "No member of a group which is to create can be passive. All must be active and constructively active" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 28). You must give your full contribution and never subordinate your ideas.

Miss **Follett** suggested that group membership also involved communication, contribution and a common purpose. Group membership required a willingness to contribute all you have to give, an ability to communicate your position, and the capability to work toward the group's common goal. As a member of the audience, you are required to pay attention, to participate in the responses and to provide your energy for the actors.

Westley and Mintzberg state that the "audience is needed" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 20). And the audience must be active if the performance is to be effective. They must applaud the good and complain about the bad. And they should not just agree with everything happening on stage. Miss **Follett** viewed compromise with the same disdain as passivity: "War will continue ... until we relinquish the ideas of compromise and concession (**Follett**, 1918, p. 26)."

She said that you must not relinquish your ideas, but at the same time you must be open for what others have to give. In the group it is not a matter of one idea being supplanted by another, but "that there has been evolved a composite idea" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 25). To have a true team, every member must contribute everything that he/she has to give. Each member must have a conviction to their ideas and they must be willing to recognise and respect a similar conviction in their fellow team-mates. This does not mean that the team should consist of clones, but individuals with differing ideas and convictions. It is by recognising the different ideas and points of view that we begin to create. And what we create is something which is better than anything we could have created alone and separately.

Like an audience, the group is never a team of uniformity, but rather a team of the "unifying of opposites" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 29). Each team member is different from her/his team-mates, and a true team is the total integration of these differences. Miss **Follett** states: "The only use for my difference is to

join it with other differences" (Follett, 1918, p. 29). This unification is a source of creation, for whenever there is a true team there exists the possibility of creating something new. The creation of a new idea is a group accomplishment not a personal one, and the team members feel "only elation that the group has accomplished something" (Follett, 1918, p. 31). In the group you will be able to achieve things you would have never been able to do individually.

In Miss Follett's opinion to be a true and good member of the group, one must have a strong belief in your own ideas, and a willingness to share that conviction with your fellow members. It also entails sharing with one another your experiences. Membership means that one must "learn to cooperate" (Follett, 1927b, p. 124). The leader must encourage all to share their experiences and to share in his/her experiences. It is this shared wisdom that gives the group strength, solidarity and power. Westley and Mintzberg say that the "vision comes alive only when it is shared" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 21). Miss Follett continues in this line of thought and states that the leader is able to translate the shared experience into a common purpose, and is the one who "can organise the experience of the group" (Follett, 1933, p. 53).

As we have seen, Miss Follett's views on leadership not only speak of the responsibilities of the leader, but also of the responsibilities of the followers. The followers' responsibilities also include not relinquishing their power or responsibility to the leader. Membership does not mean mindless following, it means contribution and a responsibility to contribution. The leader should "make us feel our responsibility" (Follett, 1930a, p. 214). Miss Follett believed that as a member of a team each needs to pull her/his weight, and should be worthy of being a team member. If a leader makes each member understand her/his contribution then "he gets men whom it is worthwhile to lead" (Follett, 1930a, p. 214). Leadership is a two-way street, there is a need for competent leaders and a need for competent team members. If either is missing then we do not have a team and therefore nothing can be created. The performance is also reciprocal, it requires the actors actions as well as the audience's reactions.

Membership does not mean blind obedience to Miss Follett, but rather it translates into contribution. It has been previously mentioned that for Mary Parker Follett, membership requires that you give all you have to give, you appreciate what others have to give and together you develop a common purpose which you then labour together to obtain. Membership also has another component. In a situation where there is leadership there must also exist a group of "the led". So what is the role of "the led" in the group? They are not passive sheep, looking to obey and follow. Their main purpose is to "help keep the leader in control of a situation" (Follett, 1933, p. 54). Thus all members have a part in the leadership of the group. All have a leadership responsibility to the group. All must work together with the leader to keep the group on course. The entire group, including the leader, work as one. The individual members do not work separately towards the goal, the group pulls together towards the finish line.

Westley and Mintzberg suggest that this interactive nature of visionary leadership requires repetition from the strategic visionary, representation from the actor, and assistance from the audience. This model works well when applied to Mary Parker Follett's views on leadership as well. In Miss Follett's view, the leader first must have an expertise and working knowledge of the issues at hand. Second, the leader must understand the goals and views of the group, pull them together, and lead the group to the goal. Finally, it is the whole group which achieves the goal. Only by working together can they obtain their goals. Unlike Westley and Mintzberg, Miss Follett brings in the audience during rehearsals so as to support the leader all the way through the process.

Assumption two: strategic content and context are important

The second assumption of Westley and Mintzberg's theory of visionary leadership is that the strategic content of the vision is equally as important as the strategic context. Westley and Mintzberg propose that the strategic content involves two components. The central image of the vision which is the core and is surrounded by a halo which serves to assist with acceptance of the vision. The strategic context includes all factors which influence the visionary process. The second assumption states that it is not only the vision that matters but also how the vision is transmitted.

Mary Parker Follett's views on leaders and leadership are also based on this assumption. For her leadership was about attaining goals. It is not just the goal that matters, but also how the group attains that goal. As we have seen previously, the leader is able to unite the group to attain their common goal. The strategic content of the goal is determined by the leader with the assistance of the group. Together they determine their common purpose. The core is this common purpose, this common goal. The halo is the way the leader attains acceptance of the goal by all group members. It involves the way the leader is able to relate the common goal to the goals of each one of the members of the group.

Turning to strategic context, we see that Mary Parker Follett wrote about the process of attaining the common purpose. The process is an ongoing one where the leader must be able to see the future trends and adjust the group's activities accordingly. This long-range view is another aspect of the integrator role of the leader. Not only must the leader integrate divergent viewpoints in the group, but also divergent trends in the environment. He/she must be able to "see all the forward trends and unite them" (Follett, 1930a, p. 220). Then he/she must relate them back to the group, its activities and purpose. From Miss Follett's view, the leader must also relate the future trends to the whole, the neighbourhood, and the community. The CEO "must understand that whatever is good for the community is good for (the) business in the long run" (Follett, 1930a, p. 230). They must have "a vision of the future" (Follett, 1933, p. 53) and that vision must not be obstructed, it must be clear. This vision or core must have an effective halo and the leader must be able to negotiate the strategic context of the vision.

This strategic context requires that the leader look both ways, at the present and towards the future. The transmission of the vision takes place within a changing environment. The present flux the group finds themselves in will affect the future, therefore the leader must constantly adjust their understanding of the situation. Miss Follett describes this as the evolving whole. And in that the leader must understand that "each unit has to be fitted into a whole which is constantly changing, that is, into an evolving whole" (Follett, 1930a, p. 228).

For the leader this means that the world is evolving before them and the decisions that the group makes for the future, in actual fact, partially create that future. The group leader must then be able to perceive this "evolving whole" and be able to place the group within it, so as to understand the role of the group in the "whole". This requires "the most delicate and sensitive perceptions, imagination and insight, and at the same time courage and faith" (Follett, 1933, p. 53). It requires courage to accept the present, the imagination to dream a future, the strength to take the group there, and the faith in themselves and their group.

Looking at Miss Follett's views on leaders and leadership through the second assumption of Westley and Mintzberg's theory of visionary leadership, we find that her views adhere well to this assumption. For Miss Follett, leadership encompasses the purpose and process. Or in the terms of Westley and Mintzberg, it includes both strategic content and strategic context. Miss Follett believed that effective leaders united their group under the banner of their common

purpose and then led them to attaining that goal. This belief is in essence the second assumption of Westley and Mintzberg's theory.

Assumption three: visionary style adopts different forms

Westley and Mintzberg's third assumption states that "visionary style can take on a variety of different forms" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 18). They identified five particular styles, but state that the list is in no way exhaustive. The style of the leader will not change but the leadership will.

In terms of Miss **Follett**'s work this means that leadership itself has many forms. She believed that the leadership in the group changed hands according to who knows the most in that particular situation, "there will be a tendency for those to lead at any particular moment who are most competent to lead in the particular matter at hand" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 228). Therefore according to Miss **Follett**, leaders are brought forward according to the context the group finds itself in. In some matters I will emerge as the leader of our group, in other instances someone else will step forward. The leadership function of the group is transient. I may be the leader in the matter before us, but I am not necessarily the leader in all things which concern the group. This view of leadership being tied to the "expert" ran counter to the then current belief that leadership was tied to the position. Miss **Follett**'s theory of functional expertise was in stark contrast to the theory of hierarchical power and leadership, where the "manager" was the leader by virtue of being the manager. Miss **Follett** believed in knowledge-based authority not position power. Miss **Follett** felt that leadership did not reside with one person indefinitely, but rather in the group "leadership (is) sometimes with one person and sometimes with another" (**Follett**, 1933, p. 231). Leadership can be found in many different individuals. The functions of leadership - definition of purpose, co-ordination, and anticipation - are found everywhere not just in the boardroom. The leader is the one who can see the situation as it is, can integrate these functions and direct the group. This means that leadership changes hands depending who is able to handle these issues in the present context. There is an element of leadership in the environment of change. The present is changing and this has an impact on the future in that the future is also changing. The successful leader does not separate the two, he/she is able to understand their inter-relatedness. And he/she is able to manipulate the present to create the future, he/she is able to "see the whole" (**Follett**, 1933, p. 51).

The third assumption of Westley and Mintzberg's theory states that there are many different styles of visionary leadership. This assumption, like the previous two, also underpin Mary **Parker Follett**'s views on leadership. She believed that there was no one style of leadership that would apply in every situation. Rather the leader with the appropriate style for the situation would step forth and lead the group to their common goal. Miss **Follett** believed in the potential for leadership in all people. And therefore, she saw as many leadership styles as she did types of people.

This concludes the section on analysis of Mary **Parker Follett**'s views of leadership using the framework developed by Westley and Mintzberg. We have seen how much of Miss **Follett**'s work fits well within this framework. Her viewpoints on leaders and leadership appear to fall in line with the three main assumptions of the framework. The model of repetition/representation/assistance has proven to be a great aid in organising her great body of work. However, there are a few areas of Miss **Follett**'s work which does not fit neatly into Westley and Mintzberg's framework. These disparities will be discussed in the next section.

Gaps between **Follett**'s views and Westley and Mintzberg's theory

Overall there appears to be two main issues which separate the theory of Westley and Mintzberg and Miss **Follett**'s views on leadership. The first issue surrounds the level of analysis of the theory. The second is concerned with the substitutability of leaders and leadership. When seen in the light of the overwhelming fit between Miss **Follett**'s works and Westley and Mintzberg's theory, these issues are really rather small. Neither one constitutes an important threat to the use of Westley and Mintzberg's framework, but both point to the limitations of performing analysis in this manner. There can never be an absolute fit between theories and frameworks. There will always be gaps, but some gaps are acceptable and some render the framework unusable. In this case, the two areas of disparity are of interest, but not of concern.

The first issue is concerned with the level of analysis of Westley and Mintzberg's theory compared to the views of Miss **Follett**. Westley and Mintzberg's theory addresses the issue of visionary leadership in terms of the leader themselves. It is the strategic visionary who rehearses (repetition) and it is the leader who performs (representation). It is only in the last section of their model, assistance, do they concern themselves with the group/audience/followers. In contrast, Miss **Follett** speaks of the leader in terms of the team of which they are a part. She refers to the group and their leader as one entity. Thus the leader emerges from the group when their particular expertise is needed. That leader will have crafted that expertise in the nurturing environment of the group (repetition). The concept of representation for Miss **Follett** is a group effort. The entire group is involved in the development of the vision and in the transmission of that vision to all group members. Assistance is not the final stage as it is in Westley and Mintzberg's framework, but rather it runs throughout the "theory" proposed by Miss **Follett**. The audience/group/team assists the visionary leader in their preparation, the development of the vision, the presentation of the vision, and in the process of achieving the vision. The group does not wait for the performance to provide feedback, for Miss **Follett** they are involved right from the beginning.

The second issue which separates Miss **Follett**'s views from Westley and Mintzberg's framework is substitutability of leadership. As we know, Westley and Mintzberg use the metaphor of a play to model their theory of visionary leadership. In a play an actor can play many roles and is still considered a good actor. But a leader, according to Westley and Mintzberg, cannot demonstrate similar adaptability. For Miss **Follett**, all members of the group are potential leaders, and leaders emerge from the group when they are needed. Thus they play many roles within the group. Therefore, a leader who steps down today because someone else has the requisite knowledge for the issue at hand, can still step into the leadership role next week. For Westley and Mintzberg, this is seen as "lacking integrity", and they would predict that: "... through similar inconsistency (the leader) risks losing credibility" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 21).

The crux of the disparity between Miss **Follett**'s views and Westley and Mintzberg's beliefs is this idea of substitutability of leadership. For Westley and Mintzberg the "magic" of visionary leadership resides with the person. Once the strategic visionary loses their credibility (as happened to Steven Jobs), the "magic" of their leadership disappears as does their position. This is not the case in the views of Miss **Follett**. For her, the "magic" resides in each member of the group. Therefore, leaders are perfect substitutes for one another. It is your special knowledge that separates you from your fellow team members, not the possession of "magic".

Implications

It is always difficult to discuss the implications for practitioners of an "armchair" theory. It is especially difficult here because we do not really even have an

"armchair" theory to work from. Mary **Parker Follett** did not leave us a formal theory of leadership, but rather a series of commentaries on leaders and leadership. Miss **Follett** did not provide a recipe for leadership. Her approach was to comment on the situations she experienced. She may have been one of the first action researchers. Her methodology precluded a prescription for leadership and therefore, her research was decidedly descriptive in nature. In terms of relevance to a manager, Miss **Follett** could quite easily be criticised for not offering an implementation plan. But one must not completely discount Miss **Follett**'s research as being completely immaterial. To do that means that all qualitative research is also defective. Miss **Follett**'s research and all qualitative research is legitimate and provides useful information. Managers can read Miss **Follett**'s work and find resonance in their own situations. It is this resonance or "Ah!Ha!" that gives her work credence.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Miss **Follett**'s views do not completely fit within the framework proposed by Westley and Mintzberg, we can readily agree that the use of this framework has enabled us to analyse Miss **Follett**'s works. From this analysis we can say that Mary **Parker Follett** must be regarded as having a major contribution to management thought. Her views on leadership, group membership, contribution, participation and co-operation are as relevant to the study of human relations today as they were 60 years ago. What she had to say speaks to everyone. Everyone, at one time or another, works in a group. Miss **Follett**'s teachings on group membership can be extremely important to managers, employees, volunteers, and families. Perhaps if Miss **Follett** was more widely read, we would one day, "learn how to live together" (**Follett**, 1918, p. 3). And that was all she ever wanted the world to learn how to do.

Mary **Parker Follett** believed in the concepts of the group, the neighbourhood and the community. She felt that they could, if organised properly, be the saving grace of the society in which she lived. The city of Boston was a fragmented, disillusioned place in 1900 when Mary **Parker Follett** began her work in the community. During the course of her social work she concluded that face-to-face communication and heightened community consciousness could stay the growing disintegration of her community:"The acute problem of municipal life is how to make us men and women of Boston feel that we are the city, directly responsible for everything concerning it. Neighbourhood organisation, brought into existence largely by the growing feeling of each individual that he is responsible for the life around him, itself then increases and focuses this sense of responsibility (**Follett**, 1918, p. 240)."

For Miss **Follett**, the group provided the perfect vehicle for her crusade for reform. It is within the group that she felt that the members could be truly creative. Within the group they could create things they would not be able to if they existed alone and outside of the group. Membership in a group had obligations and rewards. The members had to give all their capabilities and gifts and not hold back, and at the same time they must be willing and open to the ideas and capabilities of their fellow members. From this you received "the secret of wholeness". (**Follett**, 1918, p. 31). According to Miss **Follett**, this sense of wholeness, belonging, and fellowship leads to a real neighbourhood and community.

Miss **Follett** also studied the role of leaders within these groups. The leaders she proposed were not like those which were traditionally thought of as leaders. These leaders were true leaders not "borough bosses". Their focus was the group not themselves, their goals were the group's not personal ones, and their rewards were not for themselves alone but also for the group. They emerged from their group, they were not elected or chosen. Their expertise in the matter concerning the group gave them the leadership. Once that issue was resolved or another matter arose which required other expertise, a different leader would step forward.

Mary **Parker Follett** saw the future in this form of leadership. In her opinion, these leaders not only commanded the present but also drew forth the potential future. The group must work together constructively and co-operatively towards a common goal. The leader unites the group by integrating the differences and individual goals. The great leaders are those who are able to see the latent possibilities in their members, is able to draw them out, harness their energy, and give them focus. Miss **Follett** believed that in each of us there is this unawakened potential, this passion of life and only a true leader has the ability to tap into it. She states:"Whoever connects me with the hidden springs of all life, whoever increases the sense of life in me, he is my leader (**Follett**, 1930b, p. 259)."

Given the state of Roxbury, Massachusetts, today and more generally the hostility of the world, one could say that there are no traces of Mary **Parker Follett**'s future vision. But she cannot be dismissed as simply a foolish Utopian. She believed in all that is good in human beings and also believed in the potential for us to live together. She spent her entire life trying to find a way for people to live harmoniously. It is a dilemma that continues to this day. People are still trying to find a better way for us to work together. Despite the fact that very few people know who Mary **Parker Follett** was, it seems that many of her ideas are still alive and well.

References

1. **Follett**, M.P. (1918), *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government*, Longmans Green & Co., New York, NY.
2. **Follett**, M.P. (1927a), "The psychology of control", in Metcalf, H. (Ed.), *Psychological Foundations of Management*, A.W. Shaw Company, New York, NY.
3. **Follett**, M.P. (1927b), "How must business management develop in order to possess the essentials of a profession", in Metcalf, H.C. (Ed.), *Business Management as a Profession*, A.W. Shaw Company, New York, NY
4. **Follett**, M.P. (1930a), "Leader and expert", in Metcalf, H. (Ed.), *Business Leadership*, Sir Issac Pitman & Sons, New York, NY.
5. **Follett**, M.P. (1930b), "Some discrepancies in leadership theory and practice", in Metcalf, H. (Ed.), *Business Leadership*, Sir Issac Pitman & Sons, New York, NY.
6. **Follett**, M.P. (1933), "The essentials of leadership", *Proceedings of the Rowntree Lecture Conferences*, University of London Press, London.
7. Westley, F. and Mintzberg, H. (1989), "Visionary leadership and strategic management", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 10, pp. 17-32.

Illustration

Caption: Figure 1; Using drama to describe visionary leadership; Figure 2; The dynamic and interactive model for leadership

[Indexing \(details\)](#)  Cite

Subject	Studies; Leadership; Decision making; Groups
Classification	9130: Experimental/theoretical 2310: Planning 2200: Managerial skills
Title	Mary Parker Follett : visionary leadership and strategic management
Author	McLarney, C; Rhyno, Shelley
Publication title	Women in Management Review
Volume	14
Issue	7
Pages	292-302
Number of pages	0
Publication year	1999
Publication date	1999
Year	1999
Publisher	Emerald Group Publishing, Limited
Place of publication	Bradford
Country of publication	United Kingdom
Publication subject	Women's Interests
ISSN	09649425
Source type	Scholarly Journals
Language of publication	English
Document type	Feature
ProQuest document ID	213177193
Document URL	http://search.proquest.com/docview/213177193?accountid=6180
Copyright	Copyright MCB UP Limited (MCB) 1999
Last updated	2014-05-24
Database	ABI/INFORM Global

[Tags](#)  About tags | [Go to My Tags](#)

 **Add tags**

Sign in to My Research to add tags.

[Back to top](#)