

Zesz. Nauk. UEK, 2022, 2(996): 99–117
ISSN 1898-6447
e-ISSN 2545-3238
<https://doi.org/10.15678/ZNUEK.2022.0996.0206>

Problems in Defining Leadership – A Systematic Literature Review

Problemy definicyjne dotyczące przywództwa
– systematyczny przegląd literatury

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Suggested citation: Bugaj, J., Sulyma, A. (2022) "Problems in Defining Leadership – A Systematic Literature Review", *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie* 2(996): 99–117, <https://doi.org/10.15678/ZNUEK.2022.0996.0206>.

ABSTRACT

Objective: The paper offers an analysis and definition of the concept of leadership in the light of current socio-economic trends. The following research questions were posed: "How is leadership understood?" and "What elements comprise its definition?". The definitions of leadership place the term in a range of categories: as a characteristic, a behaviour, a process, a role relationship, or a position in an organisational structure. It has been analysed through multiple paradigms, including classical, transactional, transformational, situational, and service leadership. It is not clear at present which definition is dominant, nor which research methods have been used to determine its constituent elements.

Research Design & Methods: A critical and systematic literature review covering publications that appeared in the years 2010–2020; 55 full-text indexed publications were analysed from the Scopus database.

Findings: The research draws together and organises definitions of leadership that have appeared in the last 10 years in the publications indexed from the Scopus database. The authors also put

forward their own definition of leadership from the perspective of management and quality sciences.

Implications/Recommendations: Organising the definition of leadership allows the authors to understand the diversity and complexity which have a positive impact on building, strengthening and developing leadership. The study also brings to light areas and directions for further research, e.g. in the gender of managers or discrepancies in the perception of leadership resulting from publications from various geographic and cultural regions.

Contribution: Arranging the existing definitions of leadership and its components from the perspective of management and quality sciences; demonstrating that a qualitative approach is increasingly used in leadership research.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: leadership, definition of leadership, systematic literature review, critical literature review.

JEL Classification: C18, M12.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: W artykule przeprowadzono analizę pojęcia przywództwa oraz opracowano jego definicję odpowiadającą aktualnym trendom społeczno-gospodarczym. Postawiono następujące pytania badawcze: w jaki sposób rozumiane jest przywództwo oraz jakie są składowe jego definicji. Dotychczasowe definicje przywództwa traktują je w różnych kategoriach: jako cechę, zachowanie, proces, relację ról czy miejsce w strukturze organizacyjnej. Badacze z różnych krajów analizują je wielostronnie, z perspektywy odmiennych paradygmatów przywództwa: klasycznego, transakcyjnego, transformacyjnego, sytuacyjnego czy służebnego. Obecnie nie można zatem jednoznacznie określić, jaka definicja przywództwa dominuje oraz jakich metod badawczych użyto do określenia jej składowych.

Metodyka badań: Krytyczny i systematyczny przegląd literatury z lat 2010–2020. Analizie poddano 55 pełnotekstowych wersji publikacji indeksowanych w bazie Scopus.

Wyniki badań: Uporządkowano definicje przywództwa występujące w publikacjach indeksowanych w bazie Scopus w ostatnich 10 latach. Ponadto opracowano autorską definicję przywództwa z perspektywy nauk o zarządzaniu i jakości.

Wnioski: Wyniki analizy pozwalają uporządkować definicję przywództwa, w konsekwencji umożliwiając zrozumienie jej różnorodności i złożoności, co ma pozytywny wpływ na budowanie, wzmocnienie i rozwój przywództwa. W artykule wskazano też obszary i kierunki dalszych badań, np. w kontekście płci menedżerów lub rozbieżności w postrzeganiu przywództwa wynikające z różnych obszarów geograficznych i kulturowych.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Uporządkowano dotychczasowe definicje przywództwa i jego składowe z perspektywy nauk o zarządzaniu i jakości. Potwierdzono również stosowanie podejścia jakościowego w badaniach naukowych dotyczących przywództwa.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: przywództwo, definicja przywództwa, systematyczny przegląd literatury, krytyczny przegląd literatury.

1. Introduction

Since the 19th century, the issue of leadership has been constantly evolving and has been a frequent focus of scientists and practitioners (Burns 1978, Bass 2010, Cameron 2013, *Leading at a Higher Level...* 2010). According to Chaudhry, Javed and Sabir (2012), leadership is considered one of the most outstanding and less understood phenomena in the field of management. Blanchard stressed that the definition of leadership has in recent times been modified to mean “the capacity to influence others by unleashing their power and potential to impact the greater good” (*Leading at a Higher Level...* 2010, p. XVI). But he also understands leadership as “the process of achieving worthwhile results while acting with respect, care, and fairness for the well-being of all involved” (*Leading at a Higher Level...* 2010, p. XVI). In such circumstances, those in charge of leading organisations feel a greater need to improve their leadership skills. Global events of recent years have shown that leadership is undoubtedly very important (Wilson 2020, p. 280) and constitutes a significant part of every organisation.

The multitude of ways in which the concept is understood suggests that it is ambiguous (*Transformational and Charismatic...* 2013, p. 1; Alvesson & Spicer 2012, p. 367), “elusive and enigmatic, despite years of effort to achieve a satisfactory interpretation” (Avery 2009, p. 21). Stogdill suggested that “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who may have attempted to define the concept” (Stogdill 1974, p. 259). Despite the large number of definitions, leadership may be considered the foundation of a given organisation’s performance and growth. It is present in any public and non-public organisation in both formal and informal ways (Zonneveld, Pittens & Minkman 2021, p. 17). Ideas on how to define leadership have evolved alongside scientific, technical, and social development, as well as due to planned and unforeseen changes both within and around organisations.

Most of the definitions lead to the conclusion that “leadership has been defined in terms of traits, behaviours, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships, and the occupation of an administrative position” (Yukl 2006, p. 2). Originally, terminology concerning leadership appeared in military and political organisations (Freihat 2020, p. 365). Today, because of its presence in various areas, industries, and spheres of human activity, leadership is an interdisciplinary term. Thus, research on leadership has for many years been a subject of interest for researchers doing both theoretical research and more practical applications. The objective of the work behind this article was to find answers to questions about defining leadership and the components of its definition. Our literature review is an original contribution to the development of management and quality studies and fills a research gap concerning the organising of definitions of leadership and its components.

2. Research Method

A systematic and critical literature review was employed to find answers to the research questions. This method identifies, evaluates, and critically analyses the data that qualifies for inclusion in the research. The advantages of using this method include (Czakoń 2013, pp. 57–60): being able to combine the results of previous research and perspectives to find answers to current research questions; being able to present areas under investigation with ambiguous or different results, including at the border between interdisciplinary research; being able to identify unexplored or under-explored areas that may be key to the development of scientific theories (Webster & Watson 2002, p. 3) and building conceptual models. A systematic literature review follows a well-defined procedure contained in PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) – the QUOROM guidelines for systematic literature reviews.

Within the present study, the procedure of a systematic literature review was carried out in four phases (Fig. 1) (Czakoń 2013, p. 124):

Phase I – defining the goal of the research – for the purposes of this article, the scope of the research was defined as related to the evolution of the concept of leadership and research methods used to for studying leadership.

Phase II – identifying specialist literature; selecting publications; developing a database – the concept of leadership is popular in scientific literature, and concerns various fields (e.g. educational leadership, leadership in healthcare) and scientific areas (management, psychology, pedagogy). Thus, the area for analysis was narrowed down to a certain group of texts by introducing the following criteria:

- articles in English,
- articles located in the Scopus digital database in three categories: Business, Management and Accounting,
- articles published in the years 2010–2020,
- articles published based on empirical or review work,
- articles in open-access indexed Scopus journals.

Phase III – carrying out a bibliometric analysis and content analysis – the articles selected for analysis were subjected to critical analysis in two categories: the definition of leadership and leadership research methods.

Phase IV – structuring results and presenting conclusions (Snyder 2019, p. 333).

For this study, articles meeting the criteria described in Figure 1 were selected from the Scopus database.

The selection and analysis processes of said literature were subject to the following phases (Fig. 1):

- 1) verification based on title, summary, keyword, and then full-text review,

- 2) identification of data containing details of the definition of leadership and of the research carried out, including the place and period of the research and the number of respondents,
- 3) re-examination of the selected articles by two researchers to verify their eligibility for further research, taking into account the criteria mentioned above,
- 4) descriptive analysis of qualified articles (access to articles from the Scopus indexed journals database on 26.11.2021).

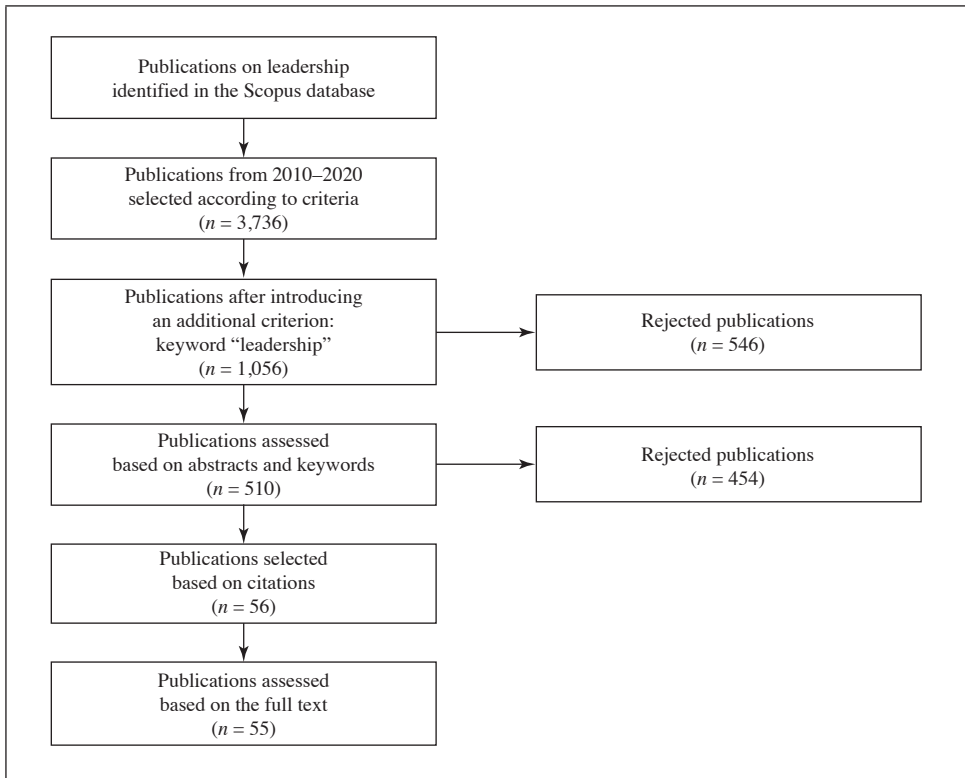


Fig. 1. The Selection Process for the Articles under Analysis

Source: the authors, based on (Page *et al.* 2021, p. 8).

In the first step, the Scopus indexed journals database was searched using only the keyword leadership. The search results showed a visible upward trend for open access publications (Fig. 2).

Figure 2 shows strong growth in publications on leadership over the period 2010–2020. A particular increase in the number of publications meeting the criteria described above began in 2013, in which 169 articles were published. In 2014,

191 articles were published (2015 – 253, in 2016 – 332, in 2017 – 417, in 2018 – 535, in 2019 – 640, in 2020 – 770). In 2010–2015, the number of articles published increased by an average of 33 (0.9%) each year, while in 2016–2020 the increase was by 73 articles (2%). It is likely that the rising number of scientific articles published over the period in question is a sign of increased global interest in leadership among researchers as well as the popularity of leadership in the lives of public and private organisations.

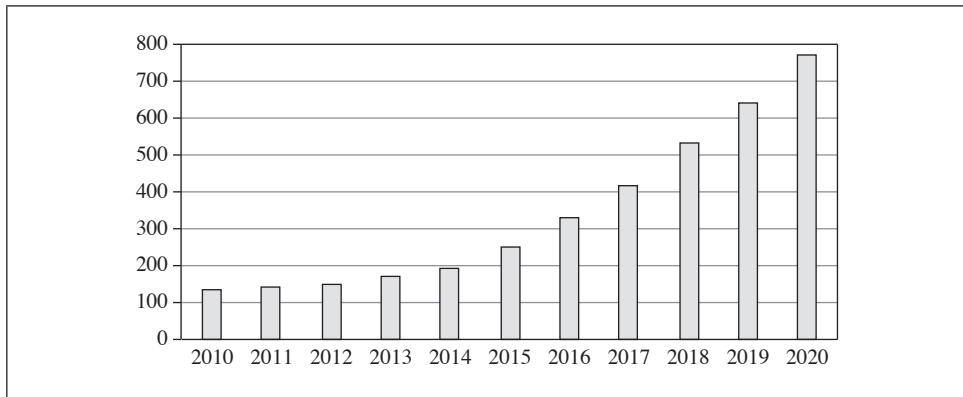


Fig. 2. Number of Publications on Leadership by Year

Source: the authors, based on search results from the Scopus indexed journals database (accessed: 26.11.2021).

The next stages of the selection process for articles was divided into three steps. In the first step following the database search, 3,736 scientific articles were identified and additional exclusion criteria were introduced, i.e. title-abs-key “leadership” and “limit-to (pubstage, ‘final’)” and “limit-to (pubyear, 2010–2020)” and “limit-to (doctype, ‘ar’)” and “limit-to (subjarea, ‘busi’)” and “limit-to (language, ‘English’)” and “limit-to (oa, ‘all’)”.

In the second stage, and following the introduction of the next exclusion criterion, i.e. the keyword “leadership”, the system generated 1,056 publications. After an initial assessment of articles, abstracts, and keywords, 546 publications were rejected because they did not include “leadership” in the title of the publication. This whittled the total number of articles down to 510.

In the third selection stage, an additional refinement criterion, associated with the number of auto-generated citations in the Scopus database, is introduced. It was assumed that the five most cited articles from each year in the 2010–2020 period would be selected for further analysis. The exception was 2013, for which 6 articles were accepted for analysis. This is because two articles – no 5 and no 6 on the

list of articles that were qualified for analysis – had the same number of citations (28 citations each). We also included only 4 articles from 2015, because one publication with a high number of citations (38 citations) is a working document that has not been categorised as a published article. All of this led us to select 55 articles for in-depth analysis. Data on articles qualified for the analysis in the form of bibliographic research are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Number of Articles Analysed at the Second and Third Selection Stages

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
510 articles identified at the third stage of selecting publications from the Scopus database										
29	23	29	27	23	28	50	62	75	70	94
55 articles ultimately qualified for in-depth analysis										
5	5	5	6	5	4	5	5	5	5	5

Source: the authors.

From Table 1 it can be concluded that the number of articles containing the keyword “leadership” in the title which were published in 2010–2015 remained relatively at the same level. The situation changes between 2016 and 2020, when the number of publications increased significantly.

In Phase III, involving in-depth analysis, two categories were analysed: the definition of leadership and research methodology.

3. Analysis

Given the interdisciplinary nature of leadership, research has been carried out in almost every area of human activity where leadership occurs, including health-care, business psychology, tourism, administrative offices, industry, production, and education. Based on the articles analysed ($n = 55$), the frequency of the term “leadership” occurring in keywords was determined. A social network analysis of the keywords is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows that “leadership” is a term that occurs in each of the articles analysed. It confirms the multi-faceted character of the concept and the practical links to the diverse aspects of an organisation. Based on Figure 3, it can be concluded that leadership is strongly linked to the development of organisations, including the implementation of innovations and the development of employees based on training, non-standard solutions, and mediation. At the same time, leadership is based on well-established scientific theories and philosophical thought and is described in the context of specific behaviours such as charisma and ethics. The graph also shows that leadership is to a large extent the organisation and people

who create it, experimenting at an entrepreneurial level, and managers who adopt different styles. Leadership does not exist in itself; it is the background against which a multi-faceted image of modern organisations emerges.

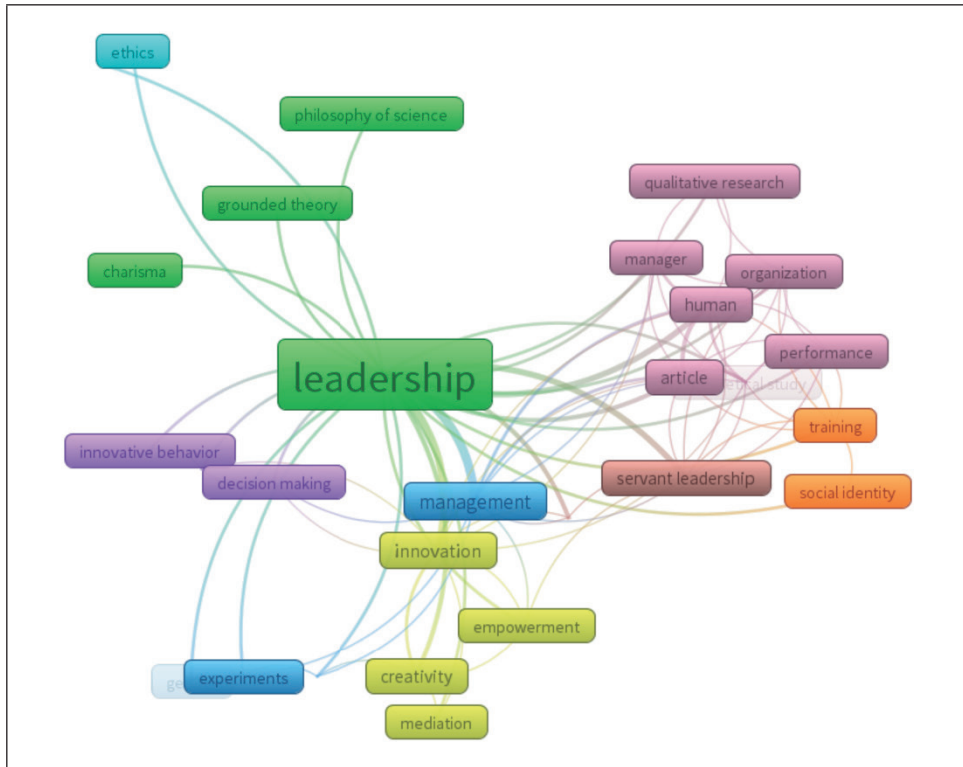


Fig. 3. Social Network Analysis of the Keywords in Articles Selected for Research

Source: the authors.

Analysis of Figure 3 also shows that leadership is a key element of any organisation. It can be used in political, governmental and crisis management (de Vries, Bakker-Pieper & Oostenveld 2010, Wilson 2020), in the efficient management of an educational establishment (Male & Palaiologou 2015, Truong, Hallinger & Sanga 2017), a health centre (Daly *et al.* 2014) and in the successful implementation of innovations in production companies (Laureani & Antony 2017).

Among the articles analysed ($n = 55$), 42% presented a qualitative approach, 24% presented quantitative analyses and 34% were theoretical considerations, including meta-analyses. Of the total, 42% focused on general leadership, nearly 9% of the articles investigated service leadership, and 9% – transformational leadership,

5.4% of articles concerned political leadership, and the same number – entrepreneurial leadership. Relational, ethical, paradoxical, pedagogical, and clinical leadership each accounted for 3.6% of the total, while articles on cultural leadership issues based on respect and social identity, as well as leadership in engineering, and shared/team leadership each accounted for 1.8%.

Fewer than half of the articles examined (40%, $n = 22$) included a reference to a definition of leadership. These were most often modified and previously published definitions. Only a few ($n = 5$) texts contained the authors' own definitions. Semantic components of leadership are shown in italics in Table 2.

Table 2. Leadership Definitions in the Articles under Analysing

Year	Article	Definition
2010	Brownell (2010, p. 366)	<i>the act of service to empower</i> followers
2010	Han, Kakabadse & Kakabadse (2010, p. 266)	<i>a desire to serve</i> to ensure that those served grow as persons and their needs are satisfied (after Greenleaf 1970, p. 4)
2011	Kempster & Parry (2011, p. 107)	<i>a socially real phenomenon</i> in the sense that if humans did not exist it would not exist (after Fleetwood 2004) <i>a social and relational influence process</i> that occurs within a social system (after Parry 1998, p. 87, Hunt 1991, Locke <i>et al.</i> 1991, Yukl 1998)
2011	Sydow <i>et al.</i> (2011, p. 330)	<i>individual and/or organisational action</i> based on social relationships that make things happen, often by influencing the actions of others by means of the production and reproduction of structures (after Huxham & Vangen 2000, p. 1165; see also Bass 1990)
2013	Kissi, Dainty & Tuuli (2013, p. 486)	<i>leading that changes followers</i> , causing them to look beyond self-interest in favour of the group's objectives by modifying their morale, ideals and values (after Pieterse <i>et al.</i> 2010, p. 610)
2013	Hoch (2013, p. 159)	<i>a dynamic interactive influence process</i> among individuals in groups where they lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals or both (after <i>Shared Leadership... 2003</i> , p. 1)
2013	Karakas & Sarigollu (2013, p. 666)	<i>a paternalistic style</i> of cultural context where leaders show individualised care and concern for subordinates in both work and nonwork domains (after Wang & Cheng 2009)
2013	Driver (2013, p. 418)	<i>an organisational practice</i> that centres on the construction of identities
2014	Ayoko & Chua (2014, pp. 504–531)	<i>the process of influencing others</i> to accomplish individual, team, and organisational goals (after Fu & Yukl 2000)
2014	Daly <i>et al.</i> (2014, p. 77)	<i>the ability to influence peers to act</i> and provide them with support and motivation; a role in developing the organisation's strategy; challenge processes; and the ability to implement vision (after Garrubba, Harris & Melder 2011)

Table 2 cnt'd

Year	Article	Definition
2014	Steffens <i>et al.</i> (2014, p. 1002)	a capacity to represent, advance, create, and embed a shared <i>sense of social identity for group members</i> (after Haslam, Reicher & Platow 2011, Hogg 2001, Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins 2005, Turner & Haslam 2001, van Knippenberg & Hogg 2003, van Knippenberg <i>et al.</i> 2004, Ellemers, de Gilder & Haslam 2004, Turner 2005). In other words, leadership is a <i>process of social influence</i> that involves making everyone want to contribute to shared goals (after House, Javidan & Dorfman 2001)
2014	Lewis, Andriopoulos & Smith (2014, p. 58)	<i>a dynamic competence and a relational process</i> (after Augier & Teece 2005, pp. 114–136)
2015	Havermans <i>et al.</i> (2015, p. 181)	<i>a dynamic process of dealing with complexity</i> (after Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey 2007)
2015	Valente, Dredge & Lohmann (2015, p. 128)	<i>a process, an outcome, and a concept</i> that is both tangible (such as a formal position) and intangible (such as an experience, a conversation, or the “soft” power of a charismatic actor) (after Bolden, Petrov & Gosling 2009, Chemers 2014, Tourish 2014)
2016	Stephan & Pathak (2016, p. 506)	<i>is a process of social influence</i> to achieve goals (after Yukl 2010)
2017	Fischer, Dietz & Antonakis (2017, p. 1727)	<i>is a social and goal-oriented influence process</i> , happening in a specific time and place and consisting in mediating constructs, such as follower motivation (after Antonakis, Day & Schyns 2012, cf. Senge 2014)
2019	Currie & Spyridonidis (2019, p. 1212)	<i>shared roles between members of a leadership team</i> who work together harmoniously, considering the necessary variety of skills, expertise, and sources of influence and legitimacy (after Denis, Langley & Sergi 2012)
2019	Cunha <i>et al.</i> (2019, p. 706–707)	<i>the ability to switch flexibly</i> between seemingly paradoxical leadership behaviours in order to reconcile conflicting interests and foster organisational ambidexterity
2019	Javed <i>et al.</i> (2019, p. 556)	<i>an invitation to others to contribute</i> (after Nembhard & Edmondson 2006, p. 947)
2019	Eva <i>et al.</i> (2019, p. 111)	<i>a holistic approach</i> that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they are empowered to grow into what they can become
2020	Paais & Pattiruhu (2020, p. 579)	<i>a process of influencing</i> existing activities; primarily to group organisations to achieve initial goals (after Mitchell & Scott 1987) <i>a process of encouraging others</i> in pursuing shared goals through successful interaction of various individual differences (after Pigors 1933)

Source: the authors.

The various elements of the definition provide a range descriptions which show leadership to be:

- a process (Hoch 2013, Karakas & Sarigollu 2013, Havermans *et al.* 2015, Stephan & Pathak 2016, Haslam *et al.* 2017, Paais & Pattiruhu 2020) of leadership, control, encouragement, and drive;
- cooperation (Kempster & Parry 2011, Alvesson & Spencer 2012, Kissi, Dainty & Tuuli 2013, Driver 2013) between team members;
- a set of objectives (Sydow *et al.* 2011, Kissi, Dainty & Tuuli 2013, Ayoko & Chua 2014, Daly 2014, Steffens 2014) and its implementation;
- aspiration, enhancement and growth (Han, Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2010, Brownell 2010) for the organisation and its members.

In summary, leadership is treated not only as a process but also as a skill or ability a modern leader or manager must have.

4. Leadership Components

Over the past 10 years, the concept of leadership has been transformed and adapted to turbulent conditions. In each consecutive period, research on leadership focused on specific components, including: “the leader” (2010), who is supposed to be motivated and inspired; creating “social relations” (2011–2012) and a sense of shared identity as a leadership foundation; impact on followers (2013–2015) to lead them to achieve their goals; “a process of objective-oriented influence” (2016–2018) as well as “cooperation and commitment” (2019), based on a flexible approach and the universality of the leader; leadership as an “incentive process” (2020) which influences the organisation’s activities. Table 3 provides a summary of these considerations.

Table 3. Dominant Components of the Term “Leadership” by Year

2010	2011–2013	2013–2015	2016–2018	2019	2020
leader	social relations	impact on followers	objective-oriented influence	cooperation and commitment	incentive-oriented process

Source: the authors.

Table 3 shows that leadership is more and more often understood as a complex process involving the leader and the organisational community. A dynamic process geared toward dealing with the complexity that comes in practice; oriented toward the general objective and group objectives that can be achieved through harmonious cooperation and flexible leadership, based on encouraging actions. On multiple occasions, Huxham and Vangen (2000) emphasised the practical aspect of leader-

ship in collaborative situations. The pair also presented organisational structures and processes, confronting them with the role of the leader (Sydow *et al.* 2011).

Based on the analyses carried out, we developed our own definition. Using it involves understanding and considering the organisational context, including the organisation's maturity, its capabilities and constraints, as well as the conditions of the immediate and further ecosystems the organisation operates in, including opportunities and risks originating on the market. This leads us to believe that the best leadership will be a mixture of the situational and service leadership paradigms, and will combine the following elements:

- the process (what?): taking effective actions based on internal and external factors; putting challenges in front of the team and every employee individually;
- the time (when?): making the right decisions and choosing the right actions for events in the organisation; implementing strategies/ goals;
- the direction (where to?): skillfully anticipating the future of the team/organisation; constant and active planning; monitoring the actions of co-workers and self-monitoring;
- the means (how?): effectively communicating goals/strategies, exerting influence and building involvement; providing motivations that drive the organisation's growth and the development of every employee individually;
- the goal (what for?): effective involvement of the leader and building the involvement of co-workers, carrying out set goals, both individual and of the team.

In conclusion, we believe that these components of the definitions presented herein are a prerequisite for a good understanding of leadership.

5. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Research on leadership conducted in the years 2010–2020 comes from different geographical areas. This may affect our conclusions. Most of the publications we analysed were authored in the UK ($n = 7$) and the US ($n = 5$), and less frequently in China ($n = 3$), Turkey, Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Canada ($n = 2$ each). We also analysed single articles from Australia, Brazil, Haiti, Liberia, New Zealand, Vietnam, Belgium, Spain, Singapore, and Indonesia as well as Asia Pacific ($n = 1$ each). As our analysis shows, some articles do not specify where the research was conducted. The absence of this information is a specific research gap that can be addressed in subsequent studies.

One limitation of our research was that it was carried out on a limited sample of secondary data, including of time (period 2010–2020), location of data (Scopus database), and breadth (limited to the 4–6 most cited articles). Additional work with a larger research sample and a wider range of temporary scientific publications will be justified in order to broaden the results and to delve more deeply into issues of leadership.

Another limitation was that the study only analysed leadership in general terms. Future research is planned to determine how leadership is changing across different paradigms (classical, transactional, transformational, situational, and service leadership).

Another interesting area for future research will be a deeper analysis of the position of women in leadership, as it has been shown that only a small number of publications addressed this issue over the past 10 years (Meuser *et al.* 2016, p. 1389; Hoyt & Murphy 2016, p. 387; Sojo *et al.* 2016, p. 519).

6. Conclusions

The notion of leadership seems to be almost intuitive, yet it is extremely complex and therefore hard to define. This difficulty is reflected even in popular articles, such as one by Kruse (2013), who points out that leadership is often misunderstood and defined in terms of the hierarchy within the company. It is indicated by titles, found in personal attributes, and attributed to management.

It is not enough to define a leader as “someone with followers” or even “someone with a vision” – these are oversimplifications. As the notion is much more complex, empowering or motivating others is not a sufficient means to becoming a leader. Managers can influence and motivate, they may even have vision, yet at the same time not be leaders. Hence, Kruse recommends understanding leadership as a complex process involving social influence that requires others, and includes a goal, but can be realised in many styles and many ways.

In examining the evolution of the definition of leadership and its components, we reached the following conclusions. Firstly, our results allowed us to structure a definition of leadership, thereby making it possible to understand its diversity and complexity. This may help others identify, build, strengthen, and develop leadership (e.g. Eva 2019, pp. 70–71). Secondly, the development of leadership is crucial for organisational practices and the role of managers. Every day, the people running organisations face internal and external challenges and focus on building collective capacity. Thirdly, the study has shown areas for further research, including in the context of the gender of managers and the varying forms of leadership resulting from different geographical and cultural areas.

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