

The 2014 Best Leadership Paper Award

Awarded by the Ian O. Ihnatowycz Institute for Leadership

Announcing the winner:

[Leadership in Teams: A Functional Approach to Understanding Leadership Structures and Processes](#)
(2010), *Journal of Management*, 36, 5-39

Authors: Frederick P. Morgeson, Michigan State University; D. Scott DeRue, University of Michigan; and Elizabeth P. Karam, Texas Tech University

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Frederick Morgeson, Michigan State University

How did you get interested in studying teams and leadership?

After graduating from Eastern Michigan University with an undergraduate degree in Psychology, I started working full-time for my family's business, a music recording studio in the Detroit area (I had worked there part-time while I was in school). In that line of work, I realized that when you hear an amazing song, you might only think of the singer or band, but the creation of that work of art really involves a huge team of people, including musicians, songwriters, arrangers, engineers, producers and managers. This realization really sparked my interest in better understanding the team and leadership dynamics involved in creating music, as different people moved in and out of leadership roles during the creative process. I think this is the origin of my interest in better understanding leadership in teams, a topic that I focused on during my subsequent graduate school work at Purdue University.

What motivated you in this research?

When I started my research at Purdue University in the mid-90s, a handful of people had written about team leadership, however, there was very little empirical research done on the topic. In addition, through some of my applied work I had noticed that even though self-managing teams were being used in organizations, these teams still had formal leaders. Key questions at the time seemed to revolve around why leaders were needed, what the formal leadership role was, and when that leadership was needed the most. During this time, I came across a book chapter by Hackman and Walton that discussed Functional Leadership Theory, a view of leadership forwarded by Joseph McGrath in an obscure U.S. Civil Service Commission technical report from 1962 (Professor McGrath was Professor Hackman's mentor at the University of Illinois). I knew I had to read this technical report and emailed Professor McGrath for a copy. He mailed me an original hard copy of the report (great filing system!) which became a foundational jumping off point for my work. The basic idea is that team leadership involves satisfying a team's critical needs and doing whatever is needed to fulfil those needs. A deceptively simple idea, but one with many implications. Much of my subsequent team leadership research has been focused on

understanding team needs, where those needs come from, and how leadership can satisfy those needs. Of course, my thinking has evolved since those early days, and I now see team leadership as a dynamic process that can arise within teams or outside of teams, and such leadership can be formally assigned by the organization or informally arise when teams work with each other. A host of experiences have shaped my views, including a sabbatical with the Center for Creative Leadership and numerous opportunities to talk with scholars and practitioners about teams and the leadership dynamics that arise within them. All of these experiences broadened my thinking and led to this paper.

What were some of the major contributions of your paper?

I think this paper crystallizes a unique perspective on team leadership, one that is focused on teams and team processes and the role of the leader in fostering team success. It also looks at how leadership can arise in four different ways: formal external leaders, formal internal leaders, informal internal leaders and informal external leaders. It also describes 15 distinctive team leadership functions, which were based on a comprehensive review of the literature (extracted from more than 500 behaviors that a leader could perform). Finally, we developed a measure of team leadership that can be used in research going forward.

Did you encounter any challenges in publishing this article?

This paper was published in the *Journal of Management's* review issue. The process for review issues is to submit a proposal to the editor for the article, and if the proposal is accepted, the article is entered into the blind review process. Our proposal was rejected twice (by two different editors), so we kept going back to the drawing board, refining and enhancing the proposal until it was accepted. I do think that our proposals kept getting better and these rejections challenged us to continue to develop our ideas. By persevering, I think we ended up with a better, more impactful article.

What's next for you?

I continue to be deeply interested in the dynamics of team leadership. I have a number of research projects centered on better understanding leadership emergence and recession. In addition, I have been working with organizations to apply these concepts in healthcare, military, and space-flight contexts. There is still so much more to do and I'm excited about all the possibilities.

For more on Morgeson's paper, please see [Leadership in Teams: A Functional Approach to Understanding Leadership Structures and Processes](#).