

# Understanding Theory through a Metaphor: Leadership is like ‘Driving a Car’

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## Abstract

Abstract concepts, while readily described, can be difficult to truly grasp. Fortunately, strategies like the use of metaphors can bridge this understanding gap. This paper explores the claim by 21st-century management and leadership scholars that effective leaders must consider polarities. By drawing an analogy to driving, it clarifies the crucial ‘both/and’ perspective necessary for navigating the complex and often opposing forces. Just as driving requires constant adjustments—a driver cannot exclusively choose one action but skilfully navigates between multiple inputs to reach their destination—leaders face continuous tensions. These include (but not limited to) individual autonomy versus team cohesion and stability versus change. Leaders cannot simply choose one side of these polarities; they must integrate them, recognising the value of both. This ‘both/and’ approach fosters greater flexibility, adaptability, and ultimately, more effective leadership. The paper introduces the ‘both/and’ perspective, including the Competing Values Framework (CVF), developed to address the challenges of complex and rapidly changing environments. By clarifying the fundamentals of driving and establishing a clear link between driving and leading, this paper demonstrates the broader value of metaphors as a powerful tool in teaching and education. Furthermore, acknowledging the multiplicity of definitions of leadership — as Stodgill remarked “*There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it*” — this paper offers its own perspective.

**Keywords:** leadership, both/and perspective, driving a car

## 1. Introduction

Abstract concepts are easy to articulate but hard to understand. In this respect, scholars claim that people should make the concepts their own through some techniques (Konicek-Moran and Keeley, 2015). In other words, there are some techniques that people use to get ownership of the concepts, which is called ‘conceptual understanding’.



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One of them is ‘finding a metaphor or analogy for it’ (Konicek-Moran and Keeley, 2015, p. 6).

In this respect, this essay attempts to clarify and illustrate the both/and perspective by using a metaphor. As Morgan’s initiative describes organisations, I would like to express how this perspective/theory can be understood through a metaphor, i.e., *driving a car*.

First, I will mention why it is not easy to understand ‘abstract concepts’ and explain the use of metaphor to ease the understanding. This will be followed by the concept, i.e., both/and, that I would like to illustrate what it is through a metaphor, i.e., *driving a car*.

## **2. Why is it hard to perceive abstract concepts?**

It is claimed that since abstract concepts do not indicate physical entities, they are associated with fewer sensorimotor-introspective representations and rely more on language-like, dis-embodied representations (Löhr, 2022, p. 550). This lack of association makes abstract concepts hard to understand.

“*Concept is an abstraction,*” claim Konicek-Moran and Keeley, explaining how to understand a concept (2015, pp. 5-6):

When students have an understanding of a concept, they can (a) think with it, (b) use it in areas other than that in which they learned it, (c) state it in their own words, (d) find a metaphor or an analogy for it, or (e) build a mental or physical model of it. In other words, the students have made the concept their own. This is what we call conceptual understanding.

Furthermore, Singh (2010, p. 127) asserts that when metaphors are used to clarify concepts, people can easily visualise the concepts so that abstract concepts are grasped better. In other words, using metaphors helps people understand the concepts that they have heard or been taught because they provide structures to facilitate thinking about highly abstract concepts (Taber, 2007).

In line with the purpose of this essay, metaphors are assumed to be helpful. In the next part, I will mention the concept that I am going to illustrate through a metaphor.

### 3. 'Both/and' perspective

The debate in the literature is whether it is possible to apply a similar model to the rest of the world because of global 'convergence'. In other words, scholars wonder whether organisations can use similar management models. According to them, country of origin and headquarters have become irrelevant, so products and companies have become denationalised (Dahles and Stobbe, 2004). A study, for instance, reviewing whether different competencies are required to succeed across cultures found no significant difference in what is expected of leaders across 40 countries (Gentry and Sparks, 2012). Similarly, Galan and Sanchez-Bueno (2009) reveal that large firms in industrialised countries follow a universal growth pattern. In other words, even if organisations are in different countries, their strategies and patterns are similar. That is called 'universalistic' theories of strategy and organisation, as postulated by Chandler (1962).

On the other hand, others emphasise the importance of 'national mindsets' (divergence) (Martin and Siebert, 2016, p. 14). In that regard, scholars who consider cultural differences state that international strategies fail unless host countries' cultural characteristics are understood (Martin and Siebert, 2016, p. 138), such as Wal-Mart's failures in Germany and South Korea (Martin and Siebert, 2016, pp. 145-146). In fact, those who support 'national mindsets' or divergence assert that cultures have become more relevant with globalisation because organisations that could survive without attention to the peoples' culture previously now have to pay great attention if they want to stay in business (Ntamere, 2018, pp. 234-235).

Notwithstanding, some critics contend that the convergence-divergence debate is not helpful because it draws a map in terms of an 'either/or' direction (Laleman, Pereira, and Malik, 2015). According to them, culture discussion is not binary; it should include grey zones. In that sense, they argue for a 'both/and' approach to how organisations deal with the tension between convergence and divergence. In other words, both arguments are correct or at least partially so (Dotlich, Cairo, and Rhinesmith, 2009, p. 77). The motto is 'think global and act local', meaning that global ideas are articulated in local languages, i.e., *glocalisation* (Martin and Siebert, 2016, pp. 146-147). In this respect, Caza and Posner (2017, pp. 58-60) point out that both convergence (etic) and divergence (emic) should be taken into account because the study reveals that while



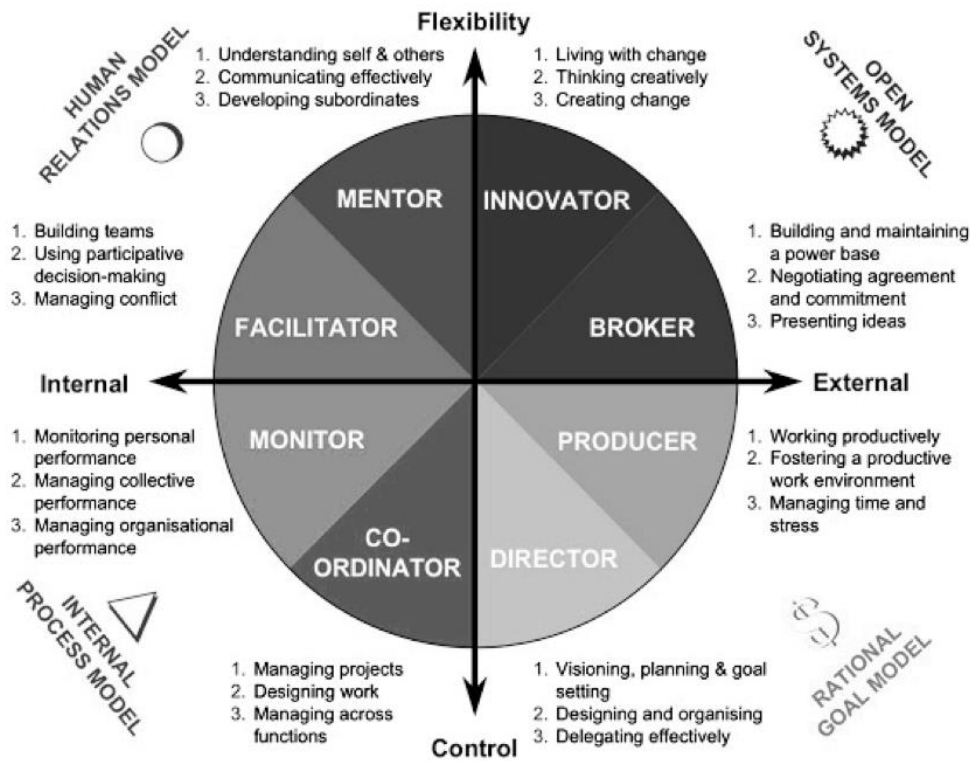
less-experienced employees have been impacted by national culture, those who have spent more time in the workplace show similar expectations of their leaders.

The concept of both/and suggests that understanding polarities is the essence of leadership. In this respect, the Competing Values Framework (CVF) was developed to address the questions and concerns of a complex, rapidly changing environment (Quinn et al., 2011, p. 11). It is suggested that two core value dimensions, control versus flexibility and internal focus versus external focus, shape the cultural orientation of an organisation (see Figure 1). A flexible and internally focused organisation exhibits the 'clan' culture that succeeds through cohesion and morale, emphasising training and development, open communication, and participatory decision-making. A flexible organisation with an external focus, on the other hand, has an 'adhocracy' culture emphasising innovation and development, as well as a future-oriented outlook. A controlled and internally focused organisation is characterised by a 'hierarchical' culture. The main features are coordination, control, organisation, timeliness, and efficiency. A 'market' culture eventually develops in an organisation that is controlled and externally focused. It succeeds through competition and productivity, emphasising goal attainment.

However, none of them is adequate alone to solve the world's complex problems. This is because Quinn and colleagues (2011, pp. 10-11) argue, "*We have CVF. This brought the idea that we need to abandon the either/or understanding, embrace both/and perspective.*" In other words, contrary to the prior assumption, remarking change and stability as mutually exclusive, i.e., either/or, CVF provides an integrated understanding, i.e., both/and (Quinn et al., 2011, p. 12). They define the issue as follows (2011, p. 329):

In the introductory chapter to this text, we argue that to be successful, organizations and their managers must move away from the traditional either/or thinking of the past and embrace the both/and thinking required for success in dynamic, complex environment. Rather than seeing collaboration and competition as being diametrically opposed, master managers must be able to harness the power of both these approaches. Similarly, the need for control cannot be allowed to overwhelm the need for creativity and change. This reflects the essence of the competing values framework.

**Figure 1.** Competing Values Framework



Therefore, 21st-century management/leadership scholars dictate that leaders should focus on polarities and not ignore one against the other. To understand what this means clearly, I will use a metaphor because, as claimed above, ‘finding a metaphor or analogy for it’ is one of the techniques that people use to understand a concept (Konicek-Moran and Keeley, 2015, p. 6).

#### 4. How is a car driven, and what is essential?

Those who know how to drive will understand what I am talking about. However, for those who are unaware, let me explain the components of a car. Along with the widely known components, including gas, brakes, clutch, steering, and shift/gear lever, a car includes the engine, mirrors, headlights, signal lights, speedometers, seats, handles, and so on.

Although some components are more popular, others are not insignificant. As a driver, we must pay attention to even the handles because if we want to drive, the first thing we need to do is get into the car. That is only possible if the handles work properly.



Furthermore, if you don't feel comfortable in the seats, you will most likely get distracted, which affects your driving.

What we have been taught about driving is to turn on the engine and take it off. Manually speaking, you have to push the gas, but the clutch is as important as changing gears. The change of gears does not just mean driving faster; it also means releasing the car for better performance. In addition to these two pedals, there is another pedal that is as critical as driving faster and more effectively: the brake.

When and how we push these pedals, moreover, are related to other components. In this sense, we need to understand what our car needs by listening to the engine. This warning can be seen on the speedometer, which is behind the steering wheel. Where it is called 'dashboard meters', we have others such as the fuel gauge, tachometer, water temperature gauge, and oil pressure gauge. A driver is supposed to understand how to read the signals. This is because they explain if everything is okay in terms of fuel, oil level, water level, and so on.

Furthermore, as drivers, we need to care about our cars' general well-being. That is called car maintenance. Despite the popular 30-60-90 schedule indicating that cars need to be checked once every 30,000 miles, we should pay attention to our cars' well-being more often than that.

When do we use the brake, and how do we know that? For that, we need to understand other cars' positions and traffic. We must constantly check the mirrors, both the rear-view and outside mirrors, and observe what's going on through the windows.

When we are on the road, if we need to change lanes or turn right or left, we should make sure that other cars are aware of what we will do, so we must know how to use signal lights. For that purpose, our hands are always on the steering wheel to keep the car in the direction we set.

Even though GPS is not integrated into cars, we are useless without it today. We use GPS not only to find the address we want/aim to reach but also to show us alternatives. In other words, even if we have one destination to reach, we have many ways to go. In this respect, GPS helps us find the most available route, i.e., the most convenient route

to avoid traffic. Therefore, not only the components mentioned above, but we should also learn to use GPS to drive effectively.

#### 4.1. How can driving be related to leading?

The gas, the break, and the clutch tell us how fast, safe, and effective we should run our organisation. Our goal cannot be achieved at the expense of safety or by focusing just on pace. Therefore, we should know how to manage the polarities.

For that purpose, we need to understand what other components, such as our employees, HR directors, and branch managers, are trying to tell us. Similar to a driver, as mentioned above, who must listen to the engine and understand what others want by constantly checking the dashboard meters, a leader needs to listen to people and consider their feedback regarding the organisation. Leadership, however, involves not just listening to employees (followers) but also caring for their well-being, which affects their performance in the workplace, as car maintenance would.

Identifying where the organisation stands and how it can be improved requires leaders to control the business environment. By doing so, leaders are able to assess whether there are any opportunities or threats, including what other organisations are doing. While a driver constantly checks the mirrors and observes what's going on through the windows, a leader needs constant analysis. In the event of an opportunity or threat, a leader uses signal lights to change directions. This is called leading the change.

Even if a leader has one destination to reach, there are many ways to get there. For that, s/he uses GPS to avoid busy or dangerous roads and to take the *blue* route, which can easily be seen on GPS. Therefore, s/he will perform better if s/he avoids the red routes and chooses the blue ones, as the leadership literature suggests.

If you think you cannot handle the gear lever, you can let the car do it, i.e., an automatic car. Or if you feel you are not skilled at parking, there are self-parking cars. That is the same for leadership. As a leader, you cannot be good at everything, but you should be good at one thing: Delegating. You don't have to do everything by yourself if you delegate tasks to people. It is a truism that leaders might want to be seen as the one. Still, the most important thing for a leader to run an organisation better is to ensure that people are included and feel valued because the literature suggests that if people feel



included and valued, their productivity increases and they show more commitment to the organisation.

### **5. Conclusion**

This essay attempted to clarify 21<sup>st</sup> century management philosophy, ‘both/and’ perspective, with the analogy of driving a car because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leaders should be able to manage multiple issues simultaneously like drivers. Therefore, leaders, in this complex environment, cannot prefer one style at the expense of another, *either/or*, they have to embrace the *both/and perspective*.

Although using metaphor to define a concept, specifically leadership, may be considered non-academic, it can still be a valid way to explain a complex concept because, as articulated by Stodgill (Northouse, 2016, p. 2), “*There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it.*”

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