**The Behavioral Dynamics of Leadership and Followership: Contextualizing Function and Dysfunction Across Key Theories**

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# Abstract

Leadership and followership are not static roles, but dynamic behavioral processes shaped by context, intent, perception, and learning. This article explores how both leadership and followership behaviors can be either functional or dysfunctional, depending on how they are enacted and interpreted within relational and organizational systems. Drawing on foundational and contemporary theories—including Leader-Follower Theory, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL), Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation, French and Raven's Bases of Power, and Group Cohesion—the article illustrates the complex interplay between influence, motivation, and behavior. Additionally, it incorporates Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Mary Parker Follett's early leadership philosophy to establish a behavioral framework rooted in reciprocal determinism, self-efficacy, and integrative power. Through expanded case examples and critical analysis, the article demonstrates how both leaders and followers co-create functional or dysfunctional outcomes. Implications are offered for leadership development practices that emphasize the use of tessellations of behavior, co-creation, adaptive responsibility, and system-based thinking in cultivating healthy, high-performing organizational cultures.

## Key Terms:

Behavioral Leadership, Followership, Functional and Dysfunctional Behavior,

Tessellations of Behavior, Reciprocal Influence, Organizational Culture

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## Understanding Behavior as Functional or Dysfunctional

Behavior, broadly defined, encompasses the observable actions, reactions, and interactions of individuals within a given context. From a psychological and organizational perspective, behaviors are often evaluated based on their consequences and alignment with individual or group goals. This evaluative framework gives rise to the distinction between functional and dysfunctional behaviors (George & Jones, 2012). Crucially, the same behavior can be either functional or dysfunctional depending on context, intent, impact, and frequency.

Mary Parker Follett introduced early 20th-century theories that emphasized the relational and integrative nature of behavior in leadership and organizational life. Follett (1924) rejected hierarchical command models and instead advocated for "power with" rather than "power over" - a concept emphasizing co-active power through mutual influence and shared responsibility. From this view, functional behaviors are those that emerge through integration, dialogue, and collective purpose. For instance, when differences arise in a group, functional behavior entails seeking integration of diverse perspectives rather than domination or compromise (Follett, 1941).

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how behaviors develop and persist. Bandura (1986) emphasized reciprocal determinism, wherein behavior is shaped by the continuous interaction between personal cognition, environmental influences, and actions. Importantly, Bandura (1977) demonstrated in his Bobo doll experiment that individuals—especially children—learn behaviors by observing others, particularly those seen as influential or rewarded for certain actions. This means that dysfunctional behaviors such as aggression, avoidance, or manipulation can be socially modeled and perpetuated if they are inadvertently reinforced by organizational culture or leadership patterns.

Bandura (1997) further identified self-efficacy—a person's belief in their capacity to perform a behavior—as a critical mechanism for sustaining functional behavior. High self-efficacy encourages persistence, goal-directed action, and constructive problem-solving, whereas low self-efficacy can lead to avoidance, passivity, or learned helplessness. Organizations that foster environments where individuals observe positive models and are empowered to act with confidence can strengthen the functional behavioral repertoire of both leaders and followers.

Follett's theory of circular response also aligns with Bandura's reciprocal determinism. Circular response posits that every action in a social system is both a cause and an effect— that is, our behavior influences others' responses, which in turn influence our future behavior. Functional interactions emerge when this dynamic leads to deeper mutual understanding and evolving coordination. Conversely, dysfunctional patterns form when circular responses reinforce mistrust, miscommunication, or power struggles.
Both Bandura and Follett stress the dynamic, interactive nature of behavior, emphasizing that context, perception, and relational processes all influence whether behaviors are constructive or destructive. For example, assertiveness in a team meeting may be functional if it clarifies decisions and resolves ambiguity but dysfunctional if it silences others or escalates conflict. Likewise, follower dissent can be a sign of organizational health—when

expressed through respectful, solution-oriented voice—but becomes dysfunctional when rooted in cynicism or sabotage.

In sum, behavior should not be judged in isolation or by intent alone; it must be assessed in relation to its consequences, the dynamics it triggers, and the system in which it operates. Leaders and followers alike can enhance functional behavior by cultivating environments that promote shared influence, psychological safety, self-efficacy, and integration of diverse perspectives—a vision both Bandura and Follett championed decades apart.
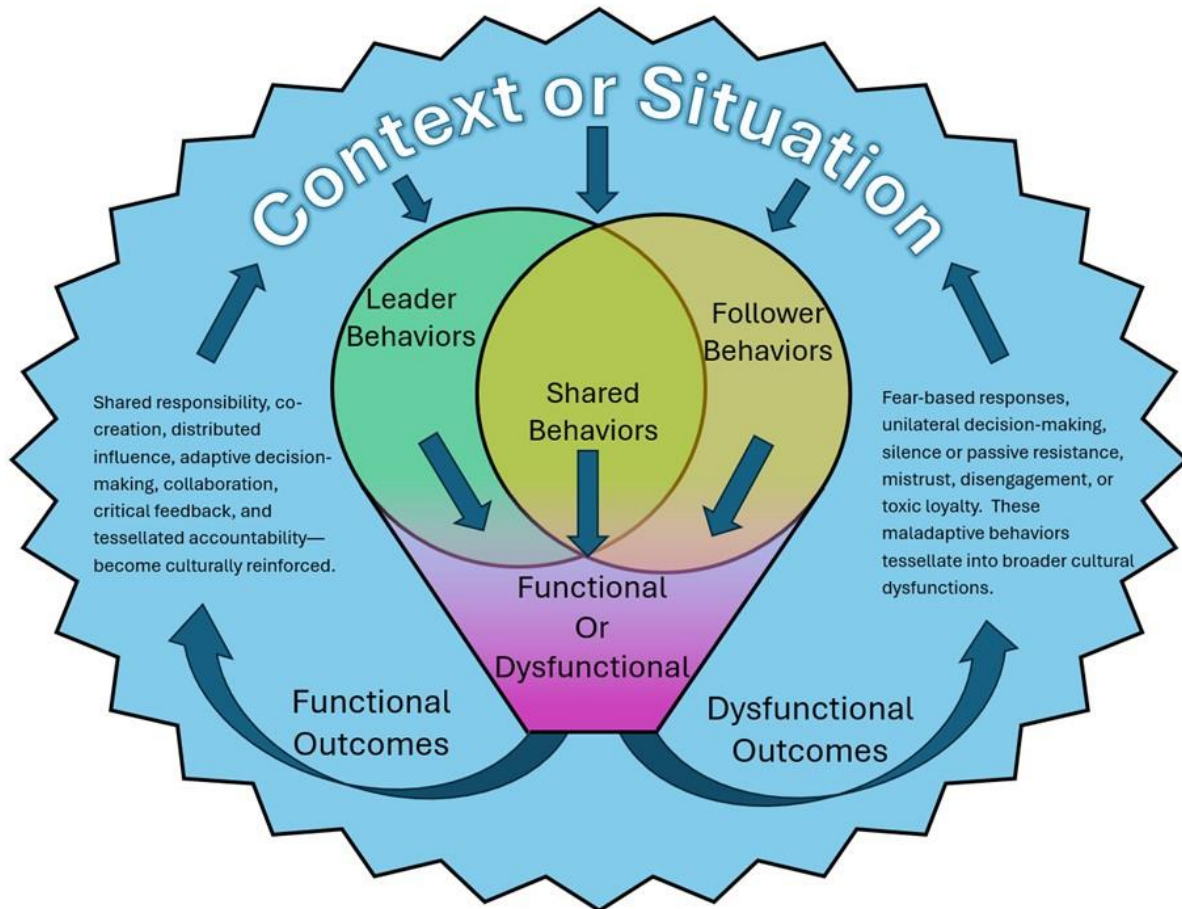


Leader/Follower Functional/Dysfunctional Behavior Diagram

– Dr. Chris Fuzie, Ed.D., 2025

### Applying Both Functional and Dysfunctional Behavior to Scientific Theories

How do these ideas of functional and dysfunctional behavior shape modern day organizations and how can we start to recognize that followership behaviors, as well as leadership behaviors, and shared behaviors can be functional or dysfunctional. Using the open-system model let us explore each of these possibilities through six well-established scientifically recognized theories.

## Leader-Follower Theory

Leader-Follower Theory challenges traditional hierarchical views of leadership by emphasizing that leadership is not a fixed role or title, but a relational process co-created through interaction between individuals (Burns, 1978; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In this view, leadership and followership are mutually influential behaviors embedded in context, rather than static positions of authority or subordination. Leadership emerges from shared understanding, negotiated meaning, and aligned action.

Kellerman (2008) further developed this view by highlighting the evolving agency of followers, asserting that followership is no longer passive or subordinate. Instead, followers increasingly function as co-creators of leadership outcomes through voice, dissent, and collaboration. Leadership, therefore, becomes a dynamic exchange wherein influence flows bi-directionally and is contingent upon the responsiveness, engagement, and integrity of both roles.

### Functional Behavior Example

A functional example of Leader-Follower Theory in action might involve a school principal (leader) who initiates a collaborative process by inviting a committee of teachers (followers) to co-develop a new disciplinary framework. The principal facilitates the space for dialogue, listens actively to classroom insights, and adapts the policy based on the team's shared input. The followers, empowered by this inclusive approach, demonstrate increased ownership, professionalism, and commitment to the resulting changes. This example illustrates mutual respect, distributed agency, and joint accountability, which are hallmarks of functional leader-follower relationships (Carsten et al., 2010).

### Dysfunctional Behavior Example

Conversely, dysfunctional leader-follower interactions arise when the relational process is disregarded. For instance, a department chair may unilaterally implement curriculum changes without consulting their teaching staff. By relying solely on positional authority and excluding follower perspectives, the leader undermines trust and signals that follower input is inconsequential. In response, followers may disengage, comply superficially, or passively resist implementation—behaviors consistent with alienated or passive followership (Kelley, 1992). The resulting disconnect not only diminishes morale but may also lead to policy failure due to lack of contextual insight and buy-in.

Ultimately, Leader-Follower Theory reframes leadership as a system of interaction, where both functional and dysfunctional behaviors are co-constructed. Functional behavior enhances collaboration and organizational learning, while dysfunctional patterns often stem from breakdowns in reciprocal communication, respect, or shared influence.

## Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory focuses on the dyadic relationships formed between leaders and individual followers, emphasizing that not all followers are treated the same and that the quality of each leader-follower relationship affects organizational outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX theory proposes that leadership is not simply a top-down influence process but a negotiated and reciprocal interaction that varies from one relationship to another. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by trust, mutual respect, support, and open communication, while low-quality exchanges are marked by formality, limited interaction, and role-defined exchanges (Dienesch & Liden, 1986).

This differentiation in treatment leads to the formation of "in-groups" and "out-groups." In-group members typically receive more responsibility, support, and access to information, whereas out-group members may experience fewer developmental opportunities and feel excluded from the leader's inner circle. This stratification has significant behavioral consequences, both functional and dysfunctional, depending on how it is managed and perceived.

### Functional Behavior Example

In a functional LMX context, a supervisor may recognize a follower's consistent performance and initiative by delegating greater autonomy in managing high-visibility projects. This enhanced trust and responsibility often leads the employee to exceed expectations, take initiative, and demonstrate greater commitment to team success. Such outcomes align with the LMX proposition that high-quality exchanges foster psychological empowerment, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and job satisfaction (Ilies et al., 2007). The leader benefits from enhanced performance, while the follower experiences recognition, growth, and inclusion.

### Dysfunctional Behavior Example

However, when LMX is poorly managed, it can produce perceived inequity and division. A dysfunctional example involves a leader who consistently favors a select group of employees—the in-group—with valuable resources, praise, and visibility, while sidelining the out-group. Followers who perceive themselves as excluded may become demotivated, withdraw effort, or even engage in counterproductive work behaviors (Liden et al., 1997). Moreover, such exclusivity can lead to resentment, decreased team cohesion, and a toxic workplace climate. When the leader fails to provide equitable relationship opportunities or transparently justify distinctions, the system of dyadic leadership becomes a source of dysfunction.

Research shows that while LMX differentiation can be functional when based on performance and role requirements, it becomes dysfunctional when it is perceived as favoritism or bias (Harris et al., 2009). Leaders must therefore be intentional in cultivating

fair and developmentally appropriate relationships with all followers, balancing differentiation with equity and inclusivity.

## Theory of Motivation (Herzberg's Two-Factor Model)

Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation (also known as the Motivation-Hygiene Theory) provides a valuable framework for understanding how intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence behavior in the workplace. Herzberg (1968) proposed that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are governed by two distinct sets of factors: motivators, which are intrinsic to the work itself, and hygiene factors, which are extrinsic and relate to the work environment.

Motivators—such as achievement, recognition, personal growth, responsibility, and the nature of the work—contribute to positive motivation and job satisfaction. Conversely, hygiene factors—including pay, supervision quality, company policy, and working conditions—must be adequately addressed to prevent dissatisfaction but do not, in themselves, create motivation. This dual-factor model implies that leaders and followers are most behaviorally effective when motivators are emphasized alongside a minimally sufficient hygiene foundation (Herzberg et al., 1959).

### Functional Behavior Example

In a functional application of Herzberg's theory, a team leader assigns a follower a challenging task that aligns with the follower's interests, values, and skill set. This alignment activates intrinsic motivation, leading the follower to experience a sense of purpose and mastery. The leader further enhances this by offering non-monetary recognition (a motivator), reinforcing the follower's internal satisfaction. As Deci and Ryan (2000) note in Self-Determination Theory, such intrinsic engagement leads to sustained effort, creativity, and psychological well-being. This behavioral outcome is a hallmark of functional leadership and followership interaction, rooted in the understanding of what drives authentic motivation.

### Dysfunctional Behavior Example

In contrast, dysfunctional dynamics emerge when both leader and follower rely excessively on external validation or avoidance behavior. For instance, a follower who expects praise for minimal effort becomes demotivated when not officially recognized. Instead of addressing the underlying issue (low initiative), the leader—motivated by a desire to avoid conflict—continues to provide superficial praise or rewards. Over time, this reinforces mediocre performance, fosters learned entitlement and weakens the overall motivational climate. This is consistent with Herzberg's (1968) view that misuse of hygiene factors (e.g., recognition without merit) can result in stagnation rather than motivation. Moreover, it reflects a breakdown in performance expectations and behavioral accountability.

Research continues to support the relevance of Herzberg's model, particularly when leaders attempt to improve morale without differentiating between true motivators and short-term appeasements (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Leaders and followers must remain aware of how behavior is reinforced and whether the structures in place promote genuine engagement or performance-neutral habits.

## Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) Theory

Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) Theory, developed in the 1970s, represents a foundational shift in leadership thinking by suggesting that leaders do not treat all subordinates uniformly but instead develop individualized dyadic relationships with each follower (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). As a precursor to Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, VDL emphasized that leadership effectiveness is not only about leader traits or behaviors but also about the quality and variability of relationships formed with different members of a work group.

VDL introduced the notion of "differentiated leadership," where leaders establish in-groups (characterized by trust, respect, and mutual influence) and out-groups (defined by formality, low trust, and transactional exchanges). While this differentiation can be functional in allocating leadership resources efficiently based on competence and trustworthiness, it can also create perceived inequity if not managed transparently or inclusively (Graen & Cashman, 1975).

### Functional Behavior Example

In a functional application of VDL, a leader rotates project leadership responsibilities among team members, offering each follower an opportunity to build trust, demonstrate skills, and participate in high-level initiatives. This approach broadens the number of high-quality dyads and reduces perceptions of favoritism. Over time, it fosters developmental relationships across the team, reinforcing equity, capability recognition, and inclusion. According to Scandura and Graen (1984), such an approach can increase team cohesion, foster organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), and improve employee retention by reinforcing the perception of fair and individualized leader engagement.

### Dysfunctional Behavior Example

Conversely, dysfunctional outcomes emerge when a leader consistently favors a single follower for key opportunities—forming an exclusive high-quality dyad to the exclusion of others. This leads to a perception of favoritism, which can trigger resentment, lower motivation, and withholding of discretionary effort among the rest of the team. Additionally, the favored follower may internalize their privileged status and develop an inflated self-perception or sense of entitlement, undermining peer relationships and team morale (Duarte, Goodson & Klich, 1994). As such, VDL-based differentiation becomes a liability when it reinforces status hierarchies rather than developmental partnerships.

Research suggests that leaders must actively manage the quality and consistency of their dyadic exchanges to avoid the unintended consequences of VDL differentiation. Transparent communication, performance-based criteria, and structured developmental opportunities can help ensure that relationship differentiation serves team growth rather than group fragmentation (Nishii & Mayer, 2009).

## Bases of Power

French and Raven's (1959) taxonomy of power remains a foundational framework in understanding how individuals influence one another in organizational contexts. Their model identifies five primary bases of power: legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, and referent. Each form of power may be held by formal leaders or informal influencers and may be used functionally to support collaboration and goal attainment or manipulated dysfunctionally for personal gain, control, or resistance.

1. **Legitimate Power** arises from a formal position or role within an organization.

2. **Reward Power** derives from the ability to provide incentives.

3. **Coercive Power** is based on the capacity to administer punishments or negative consequences.

4. **Expert Power** stems from knowledge, skill, or competence.

5. **Referent Power** is rooted in personal charisma, likability, or admiration from others (French & Raven, 1959).

Importantly, power is not inherently positive or negative; its functionality depends on context, intent, and the way it is exercised (Yukl, 2013). Both leaders and followers may apply these bases of power to constructive or destructive ends.

### Functional Behavior Example (Leader)

A leader applying expert power effectively may draw upon their deep knowledge of policy or technical skill to guide decision-making during a crisis. Because their influence is based on competence and credibility, followers are more likely to comply out of respect and trust, rather than obligation. This not only promotes efficiency but also strengthens leader legitimacy (Northouse, 2022). Expert power, when used functionally, encourages learning, problem-solving, and confidence among team members.

### Dysfunctional Behavior Example (Follower)

While often framed in terms of leadership, followers also exert power within social systems. For example, a follower who possesses referent power—gained through popularity, charisma, or social alliances—may use this influence to undermine a supervisor subtly. Through informal gossip, passive resistance, or forming alliances, the follower

redirects team loyalty away from formal authority, sowing division and disrupting the chain of leadership (Kellerman, 2008). This misuse of referent power can erode trust, derail team goals, and foster toxic workplace dynamics.

The dual-use nature of power emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership and followership, where influence is used to enhance mutual goals rather than manipulate or control. Training in power awareness and responsible influence, especially around referent and coercive dynamics—can reduce organizational dysfunction and increase team effectiveness (Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985).

## Cohesion

Group cohesion refers to the degree of interpersonal attraction, commitment, and sense of belonging shared among members of a team or organization. First defined by Festinger, Schachter, and Back (1950), cohesion has since been widely studied as a dominant factor in predicting group performance, morale, and resilience. Cohesion influences the frequency and quality of communication, the willingness of individuals to exert effort for group goals, and the emotional climate of the workplace (Forsyth, 2019). While typically viewed as beneficial, cohesion can also generate dysfunctional dynamics, particularly when group harmony becomes prioritized over task effectiveness, innovation, or ethical decision-making.

### Two types of cohesion

There are two primary types of cohesion: task cohesion, which is based on shared commitment to group goals, and social cohesion, which is based on interpersonal bonds (Carron & Brawley, 2000). Both forms can coexist, but their balance is critical to determining whether cohesion supports or impedes performance.

### Functional Behavior Example

A cohesive team undergoing organizational restructuring may demonstrate elevated levels of emotional support, open communication, and collaborative problem-solving. Members lean on each other to navigate uncertainty and remain focused on shared outcomes. Such cohesion strengthens trust and psychological safety, enabling adaptive behaviors in times of change (Edmondson, 1999). In this scenario, cohesion functions as a protective and performance-enhancing mechanism, reinforcing motivation and group alignment under pressure.

### Dysfunctional Behavior Example

On the other hand, excessive cohesion—particularly social cohesion divorced from task alignment—can produce dysfunctional effects. A tightly knit group of followers, for example, may develop strong internal norms that conflict with organizational goals or leadership direction. When directives challenge group beliefs, the team may passively

resist, ignore feedback, or engage in groupthink to maintain internal consensus. Janis (1982) warned that groupthink arises when group members suppress dissent, fail to consider alternatives, and prioritize harmony over sound decision-making. In this case, cohesion becomes a barrier to critical thinking and adaptability.

Furthermore, overly cohesive groups may form in-group/out-group distinctions, leading to exclusion of dissenters, echo chambers, or hostility toward outside input (Hogg, 1992). Leaders must therefore actively monitor the dynamics of cohesive teams, encouraging task-based alignment and diversity of thought while supporting the social bonds that contribute to team well-being.

## Using Tessellations of Behavior to Support Functional, and Reduce Dysfunctional Behavior

The concept of "Tessellations of Behavior" from *"Liminal Space: Reshaping Leadership and Followership"* provides a practical and visual framework for understanding how discrete behaviors of both leaders and followers interlock over time to create the organizational environment. Like geometric tessellations that form complex patterns from individual shapes, behavioral tessellations represent patterns of influence and response across multiple interactions.

Functional behaviors are reinforced when leaders and followers recognize, model, and reciprocate desirable actions—such as mutual respect, timely feedback, and shared accountability. When leaders model calm communication during crises, and followers respond with support and initiative, a functional tessellation forms that enhances psychological safety and performance.

Dysfunctional behaviors emerge when patterns of avoidance, favoritism, blame-shifting, or micromanagement are reciprocated over time. For instance, a leader who uses coercive power to demand compliance may inadvertently model fear-based responses, which followers mirror through silence or passive resistance. These maladaptive behaviors tessellate into broader cultural dysfunctions such as mistrust, disengagement, or toxic loyalty.

Tessellations of Behavior help clarify that no single behavior is isolated; its meaning and impact depend on how it connects with others. Leaders and followers can use this framework to reflect on whether their daily interactions contribute to functional or dysfunctional tessellations. Interventions—such as feedback loops, coaching, and aligned recognition systems—can help reshape these patterns toward greater organizational health.

When integrated with theories like LMX, power dynamics, and cohesion, tessellation

theory offers a practical mechanism for behavioral course correction. For example, instead of eliminating dissent, a leader can tessellate healthy dissent into a system of innovation by encouraging respectful challenge and modeling openness. Similarly, followers can reinforce functional behavior by reciprocating transparency with accountability, thereby helping close dysfunctional loops. By intentionally shaping these tessellations, organizations can build adaptive, resilient systems where functional behavior becomes the cultural default rather than the exception.

## Conclusion

Behavior, in itself, is not inherently functional or dysfunctional. Rather, its classification depends on several dynamic factors: the context in which the behavior occurs, the intent of the individual or group, the consequences that result, and the learning history that shaped the behavior over time (George & Jones, 2012). This context-sensitive perspective is especially relevant in leadership and followership studies, where the same behavior (e.g., dissent, directive communication, or loyalty) can be adaptive in one setting and counterproductive in another.

Albert Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory reinforces this view by emphasizing that human behavior is a product of reciprocal determinism—the ongoing interplay between personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral patterns. Individuals do not act in isolation, nor are they passive recipients of external forces. Rather, they observe, interpret, model, and adapt behavior based on perceived efficacy, anticipated outcomes, and social learning cues. Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1997) further illustrates how confidence in one's capacity to act influences whether individuals choose to engage in functional behaviors, persist in the face of adversity, or withdraw and default to dysfunction.

This behavioral lens also aligns with the relational leadership paradigm advanced by scholars like Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), which positions leadership and followership as co-constructed processes, not role-fixed identities. When both leaders and followers view their roles through a behavioral systems framework, organizations can move beyond hierarchical models and cultivate shared responsibility, distributed influence, and adaptive decision-making. In such environments, functional behaviors—such as collaboration, critical feedback, and accountability—become culturally reinforced, while dysfunctional patterns—such as avoidance, coercion, or blind conformity—are more easily identified and mitigated.

Moreover, Mary Parker Follett's (1924, 1941) early work on "power with" rather than "power over," and her call for integration rather than compromise, anticipated many of today's behavioral insights. Her vision of leadership as an interactive, evolving relationship

remains critical for building trust-based systems where mutual influence is recognized as a strength, not a threat.

Overall, understanding the functional or dysfunctional nature of behavior requires a holistic and relational framework. Organizations that develop leadership systems grounded in behavioral awareness, social learning, and reciprocal engagement are better equipped to foster innovation, internalization, and long-term resilience. By aligning leadership and followership as interdependent behavioral forces, connected by tessellations of behaviors, the path to sustainable organizational culture becomes clearer and more attainable.

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