
Africa Did Not Get Bigger: A Leadership Lesson on Perception, Potential, and Perspective

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Abstract

Leadership decisions are shaped not only by available information but also by the interpretive frameworks through which information is understood. This conceptual paper uses the contrast between the Mercator and equal-area map projections as an interdisciplinary metaphor for examining leadership perception, potential, and perspective. Africa does not become physically larger when represented through an equal-area projection; rather, the observer sees its relative geographical size more accurately. Similarly, leaders may underestimate or overestimate people, organizations, and opportunities because of the representations through which they evaluate them. Drawing on research on leader cognition, implicit leadership theories, sensemaking, managerial framing, and metacognition, this paper introduces projection awareness, defined as a leader's capacity to recognize the limitations of an interpretive representation, determine what it magnifies or suppresses, compare alternative representations, and recalibrate judgment accordingly. A Perception-Potential-Perspective framework is proposed to explain how leaders can move beyond narrow assessments toward better-calibrated decisions. The paper argues that effective leadership requires not merely obtaining more information but understanding how the lens through which information is interpreted can influence what leaders believe is possible.

Keywords: Leadership, Perception, Potential, Perspective, Projection Awareness, Leader Cognition, Sensemaking

1. Introduction

Leadership begins with perception. Before leaders make decisions about people, resources, opportunities, risks, or strategy, they interpret what they believe they are seeing. Leadership behavior is therefore influenced by the cognitive frameworks through which organizational reality becomes meaningful. Research has long demonstrated the importance of cognition in leadership. Leaders use cognitive processes to define problems, interpret complex situations, forecast outcomes, establish goals, make plans, and generate solutions (Lord & Emrich, 2000; Mumford et al., 2007; Mumford et al., 2017). Leadership perceptions are also influenced by prototypes and assumptions regarding what effective leaders or followers should look like

(Junker & van Dick, 2014; Lord et al., 1984). These findings suggest that leaders do not respond exclusively to objective reality. They respond to interpretations and representations of reality.

Cartography offers a useful analogy. A flat map cannot perfectly reproduce every geographical property of a spherical Earth. Different map projections preserve different characteristics while distorting others. The Mercator projection became highly useful for navigation, but it increasingly exaggerates apparent land area toward the poles. Equal-area projections make different compromises by preserving relative area. Africa provides a striking example. When represented through an equal-area map, Africa can appear substantially larger than many observers remember from traditional Mercator maps. Yet Africa has not physically expanded. The representation has changed. The central leadership lesson is that a representation can change perception without changing the underlying reality.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework connecting perception, potential, and perspective and to introduce projection awareness as a leadership capability. Projection awareness describes the leader's metacognitive capacity to recognize that an interpretation is a purpose-dependent representation, identify what the representation magnifies, minimizes, or omits, compare alternative representations, and recalibrate judgment when better evidence emerges.

2. Research Questions

This conceptual study addresses the following research questions:

- How can representational distortion influence leadership judgment?
- How do leaders' interpretive perspectives influence their recognition of individual and organizational potential?
- How can projection awareness improve leadership judgment by encouraging leaders to examine and compare alternative representations before acting?

3. Leadership Perception, Potential, and Perspective

Leadership cognition research demonstrates that leaders interpret complex environments through mental representations and information-processing processes. Lord and Emrich (2000) argued that cognition is fundamental to leadership because leaders and followers rely on mental structures to organize social information. Mumford et al. (2007) similarly showed that leaders facing crises use environmental scanning, causal analysis, forecasting, and sensemaking. Mumford et al. (2017) identified nine cognitive skills associated with leadership performance, including problem definition, planning, forecasting, creative thinking, idea evaluation, wisdom, and sensemaking. Yet sophisticated cognition can still operate within an incomplete representation. A leader may reason accurately from the information presented while failing to recognize that important information is absent from the representation itself.

3.1. Perception

Perception concerns what the leader believes is present. Leaders encounter organizational reality through reports, metrics, narratives, observations, evaluations, experience, and social interactions. These sources shape what receives attention. A performance system focused primarily on individual productivity, for example, may overlook mentoring, team cohesion, informal influence, conflict resolution, or knowledge sharing. The employee has not changed when additional evidence is considered. The leader's perception changes because the representation becomes more complete.

3.2. Potential

Potential concerns capacity that has not yet been fully realized. Because potential is future-oriented, it is more difficult to assess than current performance. Organizations often infer leadership potential from education, previous experience, executive presence, supervisor evaluations, and competency assessments. Each measure may be useful, yet none represents the whole person. A low performer may possess significant ability but be operating in the wrong role, under weak supervision, or without adequate development. Conversely, high performance in one position does not guarantee readiness for broader leadership responsibility. Effective leadership therefore requires distinguishing current performance from future possibility.

3.3. Perspective

Perspective concerns the lens through which leaders interpret what they observe. Managerial cognition research demonstrates that different cognitive frames can cause leaders to interpret similar information differently (Hahn et al., 2014; Kaplan, 2008). Sensemaking scholarship likewise shows that organizational actors construct meaning in ambiguous circumstances (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). Within the proposed framework, perception asks what the leader sees, potential asks what could become possible, and perspective asks through what lens the leader is deciding what the evidence means.

4. Projection Awareness

Projection awareness is the leadership capability that connects perception, potential, and perspective. It is defined as a leader's metacognitive capacity to recognize that an interpretation is a purpose-dependent representation, identify what the representation magnifies, minimizes, or omits, consider alternative representations of the same phenomenon, and recalibrate judgment accordingly. It is related to cognitive flexibility, perspective taking, sensemaking, reflexivity, and metacognition, but it is not identical to any of them. Cognitive flexibility concerns the ability to shift ways of thinking. Perspective taking focuses on another person's viewpoint. Sensemaking concerns constructing meaning from uncertainty. Metacognition concerns monitoring one's own thinking. Projection awareness adds a more specific question: What is this representation allowing me to see, and what might it be preventing me from seeing?

4.1. The Projection Awareness Process

The process has four stages. First, the leader identifies the representation influencing the judgment. Second, the leader considers the purpose for which the representation was designed. Third, the leader examines what that representation may magnify, minimize, or omit. Fourth, the leader compares alternative representations and recalibrates judgment when warranted. The process may be summarized as Representation → Examination → Alternative Perspective → Recalibrated Judgment. This framework shifts attention from asking only whether information is accurate to asking whether the representation is appropriate for the decision being made.

Proposition 1: Leaders who depend heavily on a single representation will be more likely to mistake limitations of that representation for limitations of the underlying person, organization, or opportunity.

Proposition 2: Projection awareness will improve leadership judgment when alternative representations contain relevant information that was suppressed or omitted in the original representation.

5. Africa as a Leadership Lesson

Africa illustrates the theory because the comparison between Mercator and equal-area projections makes representational trade-offs visible. The Mercator projection is not inherently fraudulent or useless. Its navigational properties made it historically valuable. The problem arises when it is used to answer a question for which it is poorly suited, such as visually comparing relative land area. The Equal Earth projection was designed as an equal-area projection and therefore preserves relative area while accepting other forms of distortion (Šavrič et al., 2019). Africa does not become larger on such a map. The observer is simply using a representation better suited to the question being asked.

The same principle applies to leadership. A financial statement can accurately describe financial performance without fully measuring organizational creativity. Academic credentials can accurately describe educational attainment without completely measuring judgment, resilience, or leadership capacity. A poverty statistic can identify socioeconomic hardship without fully representing the entrepreneurial, relational, and cultural assets of a community. A current job title can accurately describe organizational position while saying little about future leadership capacity. The leadership error begins when a representation is asked to answer questions beyond its intended scope.

6. Practical Applications for Leadership

6.1. Talent and Leadership Development

Organizations frequently classify employees as high, average, or low potential based on performance history and supervisory judgment. Implicit leadership theory suggests that such decisions can also be shaped by prototypes concerning how leaders are expected to behave

(Junker & van Dick, 2014; Shondrick et al., 2010). An employee who is visible, assertive, and verbally confident may resemble an established leadership prototype and therefore be identified quickly as leadership material. A quieter employee with strong judgment, relational influence, resilience, or learning capacity may receive less attention. Projection-aware leadership does not automatically favor either employee. It asks whether leadership potential is being evaluated through sufficiently diverse evidence, including project results, peer feedback, developmental assignments, learning agility, and performance under unfamiliar conditions.

Proposition 3: Talent systems that use multiple decision-relevant representations will produce more differentiated judgments of leadership potential than systems relying predominantly on current performance or single-source evaluation.

6.2. Strategic Leadership

Organizations can also underestimate themselves. A small organization comparing itself exclusively with a larger competitor on revenue, workforce size, or financial resources may perceive itself primarily through deficiency. Another representation may reveal advantages in agility, specialization, customer intimacy, innovation, or decision speed. This does not eliminate real resource constraints. Rather, it creates a more complete strategic picture. Projection-aware strategic leadership therefore asks which dimensions of size actually matter for the problem being solved.

6.3. Community Leadership

Communities are frequently represented through statistics concerning crime, unemployment, poverty, educational outcomes, or inadequate infrastructure. Such statistics can be accurate and important. However, they become misleading when treated as complete descriptions of the people themselves. Alternative representations may reveal social networks, religious institutions, entrepreneurial activity, volunteerism, cultural knowledge, diaspora connections, and emerging leaders. A deficit map can correctly identify problems while still failing to describe the entire territory. Projection-aware community leadership therefore recognizes both need and capacity.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Projection awareness is presently a conceptual construct and requires empirical validation. Future research should develop reliable measures and establish whether projection awareness can be distinguished from cognitive flexibility, perspective taking, intellectual humility, and general metacognitive awareness. Experimental studies could test whether leaders who receive alternative representations make better calibrated talent or strategic decisions than leaders relying on a single representation. Field studies could examine whether leadership teams that systematically challenge dominant organizational representations demonstrate greater adaptability or decision quality. Researchers should also investigate boundary conditions, because excessive representational analysis could create information overload or decision paralysis. Projection awareness is likely to be most valuable when decisions are consequential, environments are ambiguous, and several legitimate representations exist.

8. Conclusion

Africa did not get bigger. The map changed. That simple observation provides an important leadership lesson about perception, potential, and perspective. Leaders make decisions through reports, assessments, organizational charts, résumés, performance metrics, financial statements, forecasts, categories, and narratives. These representations are necessary because organizational reality is too complex to process in its entirety. Yet necessary does not mean complete.

Effective leaders therefore need projection awareness. They must recognize the representation, understand its purpose, identify its limitations, consider legitimate alternatives, and recalibrate judgment when better evidence emerges. The purpose is not to make people appear greater than they are or to replace negative assumptions with positive assumptions. The purpose is accuracy. Africa did not need to become larger. The observer needed a representation better suited to seeing its relative size. Leadership sometimes requires the same correction. Before attempting to change the territory, the leader should first examine the map.

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