OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP THEORIES: WHAT IT MEANS TO LEAD?

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Abstract. Like all terms in social science, the concept of leadership is obviously arbitrary and subjective. Over the last decade, important advancements have been made contributing to our understanding of effective leadership. Although recent theoretical works have emphasized the context sensitivity of leadership, empirical research in this field is still rare. As a consequence, scientists and practitioners still cannot recommend specific leadership behaviors to organizational leaders for certain situations with any great certainty, as knowledge in this field is fragmentary. This gap in the literature calls for research on the important area of the contextual dimensions of organizational processes such as leadership.

Keywords: leadership behaviors, influence skills, holistic approach, leader development, leadership development, business organizations.

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1. Introduction

Leaders seem to have unique opportunities because their position makes them gatekeepers for some aspects of the experience of others. But what is leadership? Like all terms in social science, the concept of leadership is obviously arbitrary and subjective. An observation by Bennis (1959) is as true today as it was many years ago: *"…the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So, we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it … and still the concept is not sufficiently defined".*

Over the last decade, important advancements have been made contributing to our understanding of effective leadership. For example, we know a great deal about the effectiveness of various leadership behaviors, based on results of meta-analysis (Judge *et al.* 2004). However, although recent theoretical works have emphasized the context sensitivity of leadership (Conger 2007; Hunter *et al.* 2007), empirical research in this field is still rare. That is, the contextual conditions under which the leadership-effectiveness relationships hold true are not yet fully explored. As a consequence, scientists as well as practitioners still cannot recommend specific leadership behaviors to organizational leaders for certain situations with any great certainty, as knowledge in this field is fragmentary (Yukl 2002). This gap in the literature calls for research on the important area of the contextual dimensions of organizational processes such as leadership (Antonakis *et al.* 2003; Rousseau, Fried 2001).

Research into leadership theory has been gaining momentum in recent years, with a multitude of studies investigating many aspects of leadership styles (Blake, Mouton 1985; Northouse 2007; Stogdill 1974; etc.). The current leadership theory is far different from the early leadership theories. The purpose of this article is to overview scientists as well as practitioners approach to what it means to lead business organization than do most mainstream approaches. Such traditional ways of leadership grow out of a view of organisations as equilibrium-seeking systems where the future is knowable and anticipated by leaders who plan interventions and control behaviours.

Methodology approach – an extensive literature review has been undertaken to explore our understanding of how leadership performance impacts on combinative aspects of leadership style and interaction between leadership behaviors, importance of influence skills, relationship between leadership behaviors and performance, neccessity of a holistic approach to leadership development. Logical comparison as well as comperative method of analysis has been invoked, whereas the research is conceptual in its nature, and conjoint analysis is a useful research technique. Further research work is needed in order to formalize a full leadership theory.

2. Combinative aspects of leadership style and interaction between leadership behaviors

Scholars acknowledge there is no universally agreed on definition of leadership in the literature (Bass 1990; House, Podsakoff 1994; Stogdill

1974; Yukl 1998). A sampling of writing on the subject, however, reveals several common themes, as follows. Leadership is a social influence process focused on achieving a common objective (e.g. House, Baetz 1979; Rauch, Behling 1984; Yukl 1998). Followers' voluntary acceptance of this influence, rather than forced compliance, is inherent in many writers' conceptions of leadership (e.g. Jacobs, Jaques 1990; Jago 1982; Kotter 1988). Many leadership definitions also include identifying a common objective and corresponding strategies (Kotter 1990; Yukl, Van Fleet 1990). While these three themes – social influence, voluntary followership and objective/strategy setting – recur in many leadership definitions, a single, specific definition that allows for consistent measurement of the construct continues to elude leadership scholars.

2.1. Importance of influence skills: how to focus followers on achieving a common objective

A great leader once said, "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do what you want done because he wants to do it". Since these words were spoken, many theories on leadership and leadership styles have emerged. However, one essential ingredient to any successful leadership philosophy is undeniable: the role of influence (Antonakis *el at.* 2007; Rauch, Behling 1984; Stogdill 1950; Yukl 1998). As such, the skills to build a sphere of influence and exercise that influence effectively are fundamental to success. Developing these skills will increase a leader's ability to obtain buy-in on strategic initiatives and execute those initiatives smoothly. This is especially true in a complex and challenging economic climate where competition is on the rise, business organizations are expanding their reach across international borders and leaders are finding themselves in positions of responsibility without direct authority.

Scholars reinforce the importance of influence skills, collaborative decision-making and flexible leadership styles in today's complex business environment (Hendricks, Payne 2007; Waldman *et at.* 2004; Hernez-Broome, Hughes 2004; Kurmet *et al.* 2010; Jaussi, Dionne 2004; Mahsud 2010; Perrin 2012; Nixon 2012). Business leaders rely on influence every day to shape their environment, lead people and achieve corporate goals. The power of influence is particularly important in an environment that requires executives to manage a growing number of projects and business conditions through collaboration and persuasion rather than direct authority. In particular, the use of influence skills is crucial when getting colleagues on board for a change initiative; soliciting across

boundaries for project resources; guiding a team to see the big picture; developing a shared understanding of the pathway to the future; making team players out of people who resist change; encouraging team players to work beyond functional boundaries; winning support from those with competing agendas; creating positive results with cross function teams; empowering others and selling ideas to both colleagues and the boss (Kaufman 2011; Dion 2012; Mahsud 2010; Perrin 2012). Improving influence skills, however, requires awareness, practice, and an understanding of how to use this power appropriately.

Other advantages of a more flexible leadership style that uses influence skills include: a shared sense of responsibility and accountability for success; more effective communication: cross-organization, cross-industry and cross-border; fewer problems with implementation as potential issues are recognized sooner; more innovation and creativity as the fear of rejection is minimized; less attrition as people feel empowered, valued and motivated to grow as leaders; less resistance to change which helps meet project deadlines; increased and wider access to critical information.

Influence skills help leaders get colleagues on board for change initiatives, access resources, guide teams, develop shared goals, reduce resistance, encourage teamwork beyond functional boundaries, win support from those with competing agendas, empower others and sell ideas to the boss. When leaders harness the power of influence, they create a shared sense of responsibility, improve communications, encounter fewer problems with change-implementation, discover more innovation and creativity, experience less attrition and less resistance while gaining access to more information for better decision making (Hendricks, Payne 2007; Waldman *et al.* 2004; Kurmet *et al.* 2010; Jaussi, Dionne 2004; Kaufman 2011; Dion 2012; Perrin 2012).

2.2. Relationship between leadership behaviors and performance

Leaders achieve their effects through the interpretations that followers and others derive from their behaviors (Hanges *et al.* 2000; Talwar 2011; Nixon 2012). The manner in which leadership behaviors are combined is crucial because it influences interpretations of the behaviors and hence shapes perceptions of and reactions to the leader. This view is based on two assumptions. First, followers receive and perceive leadership behaviors as holistic clusters rather than as disconnected separate events. Second, the patterning of their elements

influences the perception of clusters of leadership behaviors (Casimir 2001).

There is long-standing evidence supporting the assumption that the patterning of specific elements influences overall impressions. For example, Asch (1946) showed that a person described as intelligent, impulsive, and envious is seen in a more positive light than is a person described as envious, impulsive, and intelligent supposedly because the initial descriptor establishes a context within which the other descriptors are perceived. It is possible therefore for two leaders to be identical in terms of the frequency and intensity of particular leadership behaviors and yet elicit different responses from the same follower simply because they combine the leadership behaviors differently. In other words, identical leadership behaviors can evoke different responses from a follower depending on how the behaviors are scripted.

Leadership scripts can exert considerable influence on perceptions of specific leadership behaviors. Scripts can be thought of as memory schemata for behavioral episodes in that they are cognitive structures that outline a sequence of events constituting a particular activity and contain not only the details of specific events, but also the interrelationships among the events (Eckblad 1981). The meaning given to a particular situation, or behavior, is derived from knowledge structures such as beliefs and implicit theories, and schematic structures like prototypes and scripts (Nisbett, Ross 1980).

There are scripts for a number of typical business organizational activities such as conducting a meeting, providing performance feedback to an employee and handling absenteeism (Lord, Kernan 1987; Wofford, Goodwin 1994). Scripts influence attitudes, expectations, judgements, predictions, and preferences (Nottenburg, Shoben 1980), because they serve as interpretive frameworks in that they provide a guide for people regarding how they and others should behave in a particular situation (Shaw 1990; Talwar 2011; Raghavendran 2011; Perrin 2012; Nixon 2012).

3. Neccessity of a holistic approach to leadership development

3.1. Evaluation of organizational leadership capability

During the last two decades, leadership on the collective level has come under greater focus. This has arisen from the necessity to transfer leadership capabilities to the strategic assets of organizations that allow them to achieve performance on a daily basis with long-term success. That means organizational leadership capabilities that are based on the leadership skills and knowledge of organizational members on the one hand, and the extent to which these skills and knowledge are embedded in the structure of an organization on the other. Therefore, the measurement of organizational leadership capability is an important issue for improving organizational performance in the long term (Kurmet et al. 2010).

The capability of leadership exists at both the individual and the collective level, which together in their sum, forms organizational leadership. However, the traditional view of leadership presumes a top-down influence of the leader on followers, where the leader is the primary originator and conductor of leadership (Drath 2001; Pearce, Conger 2003). Leadership is also a property of the whole business organization (O'Connor, Quinn 2004) where collective leadership qualities are embedded in the organization's systems and structure (Pasternack et al. 2001). This is important to mention because the success of an organization as a whole depends not on the performance of some remarkable individuals, but on the collective contribution of all members (Jacobs 1981). For such success, many people have to support the well being of the business organization and the organization should be aware of its member's wish to support their organization and understand the essence of collective work.

However, examinations of leadership are mostly based on assumptions that are widely shared across a diverse range of leadership scholars, such as "trait" theory, behavioural approaches, and "content-process" approaches (Conger 2006). Leadership described in terms of such approaches has from time-to-time been known as "heroic" leadership. Edvinsson (2002) describes this as one-dimensional leadership, which is insufficient for acting in the modern business environment. Pasternack et al. (2001) share this understanding and have said that leadership must not be a solo act performed by a charismatic chief executive officer. They argue that leadership can be seen as an institutional capacity and a strategic asset. Describing the process of creating strategy, Mintzberg et al. (2005) and Gratton (2000) emphasize the organizational capability of learning and discovery, which construes the strategic initiative of organizational members on different levels of the business organization. Mayo (2001) considers this multi-level activity of organizational members as collective leadership, and Pasternack et al. (2001) have assessed this strength within the framework of the institution's leadership quotient.

This dynamic capability is not only important to business organizations to achieve success in the

present, but it is also important in the long-term. Day *et al.* (2004) believe that team leadership capacity contains potential for future performance as well.

3.2. Leader development vs leadership development

The concepts of leader and leadership development are to a large extent used interchangeably with no evident distinction made between them in literature. Most of the studies speak of leadership development, when in fact they refer to leader development and the reasons and the means through which business organizations are able to develop the leadership skills of their executives. However, leadership development holds a broader meaning than simply developing the leadership skills of individual leaders, although leader development still remains a critical aspect for organizations (Dalakoura 2010; Raghavendran 2011).

Leadership is not just an individual phenomenon. It is a complex phenomenon that encompasses the interactions between the leader and the social and organizational environment (e.g. Boal, Hooijberg 2001; Hunt, Dodge 2001; Osborn *et al.* 2002; Vera, Crossan 2004; Waldman *et al.* 2004; Porter, McLaughlin 2006).

Leadership development embraces the development of a broader and collective framework in which leadership is developed in practice (Hernez-Broome, Hughes 2004). As a social process, it involves everyone in the organization (Barker 1997; Wenger, Snyder 2000; Tichy, Cardwell 2002), and special attention is placed on the development of such relations between individuals that will add value to the organization; Tsai, Ghoshal 1998). At the heart of this relational model lies the commitment of the members of the business organization towards mutual responsibilities, further supported by mutual trust and respect (Brower *et al.* 2000; Liu *et al.* 2011).

The importance of leadership development is not diminishing the importance of leader development. Both leader development and leadership development are necessary, in a systemic attempt to increase leadership effectiveness in an organization (Day 2001). As such, both leader and leadership development should be integrated in a new leadership perspective that will be in alignment with the broader goals and strategy of the organization. If that is achieved, then it can be expected that the development of leadership at all levels will have the greatest possible impact on the business organization performance (Day 2001; O'Toole 2001; Liu *et al.* 2011).

3.3. The growing need for leadership development

A rich body of literature treats leadership development as an increasingly critical and strategic imperative for business organizations and argues that organizations that wish to survive and succeed in today's turbulent and highly competitive business environment need to develop leadership at all levels (e.g. Day 2001; O'Toole 2001; Tichy, Cardwell 2002; Leskiw, Singh 2007).

The growing recognition that leadership development involves more than just developing individual leaders leads to a greater focus on the context in which leadership is developed (Hernez-Broome, Hughes 2004). The need for leadership development is imperative in modern organizational environments where changes create uncertainty and unpredictability and problems are too many and too complex to be identified and sorted out by one or a few persons (Beeson 1998; McCall 1998; Bennis 1999; O'Toole 2001). In cases of constant changes, the need for communication, coordination, consensus and rational decision making increases (Schuler *et al.* 1993; Priem *et al.* 1995; Ketchen *et al.* 1996; Homburg *et al.* 1999). Therefore, organizations operating in a rapidly changing and hostile environment are called to develop mechanisms and systems that will enable its people to withstand the challenges of such a demanding business environment (Kessler, Chakrabarti 1996).

However, for the successful implementation of the corporate strategy, organizations need to develop the appropriate competencies in their people. As Becker and Huselid (2006) argue, employees are strategically important when they are able to contribute to a business organization's strategic objective, by directly implementing the organization's strategy. Especially in the case of competitive corporate strategies, organizations need leaders at all levels (Youndt *et al.* 1996; Dess *et al.* 1997; Cameron, Quinn 1999; Guthrie *et al.* 2002; Neal *et al.* 2005; Paglis 2010), since only then organization will exhibit the necessary flexibility and speed in decision making and they will be able to stand up to the high requirements of such strategies.

Leadership development is not only the result of traditional, classroom-type training programs, but rather the result of a series of well-coordinated activities aiming at developing employees, by assisting them to learn from their work and from their superiors (e.g. Collier, Esteban 2000; Day 2001; Brown, Posner 2001; Tichy, Cardwell 2002). Also, leadership development should be integrated into everyday practices and thus be-

come a part of the culture of the organization (e.g. McClelland 1994; Senge 1995; Brown, Posner 2001; Tichy, Cardwell 2002; Paglis 2010). It is also very crucial that the chief executive officers and line managers actively engage in the development of leaders at all levels.

4. Conclusions

The efficiency and survival of business organizations is dependent on the selection and development of future leaders. It is obvious that organizations of all sizes face major challenges in preparing leaders that can handle major organizational challenges. To be successful, business organizations must be willing to invest in building leadership capabilities at all levels of the organization. The approach to leadership development should be viewed as part of the fabric of organizations in order to receive the support and attention needed to maximize effects on participants. Institutionalizing an effective leadership development culture is one of the most effective strategies for attracting and retaining talent, and ensuring competitive advantage in the long run. Business organizations should take a long-term approach to leadership development and create a supportive environment in order to produce effective leaders. The long-term success of leadership development initiatives depends on an organizational culture that considers the development of future leaders as a long-term strategic priority (Block, Manning 2007).

Leadership development is a continuous process that should not be limited to leadership training, formal instructions on professional skill, performance in developmental job functions, and participation in self-developmental programs. To be truly effective, leadership development must include a global perspective on how the dynamics of world events impact organizational effectiveness. Systematically driven leadership development initiatives usually lead to enhanced leadership capabilities and organizational performance.

A rich body of literature treats leadership development as an increasingly critical and strategic imperative for business organizations and argues that organizations that wish to survive and succeed in today's turbulent and highly competitive business environment need to develop leadership at all levels. Therefore, organizations operating in a rapidly changing and hostile environment are called to develop mechanisms and systems that will enable its people to withstand the challenges of such a demanding business environment.

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