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LEADERSHIP: A PSYCHOLOGY AND DISCURSIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to give a general overview of the term “leadership” as used and explained by different authors and how it is situated in the context of psychology and discursive leadership. Purpose:

Methodology: The paper adopted a desktop methodology research design. Key words such as leadership styles, leadership, leadership dimensions, and communication in leadership were used to source published papers from popular search engines such as google and scholar. The published papers were then assessed for quality and those found relevant were used to generate results. The type of data analysis method used was qualitative data analysis. Specifically, content analysis was used to identify key themes and research gaps from papers.

Findings: Communication was found to be a crucial element in almost all leadership types and dimensions. However, the role and importance of communication in leadership was more implied than expressly advocated for in the various leadership forms and styles. Consequently, a discursive approach to leadership was recommended which expressly recognizes the role of communication, the role of framing and the need to infuse to get things done by communicating more effectively. It was also suggested that the excesses of charismatic leadership styles could be a downside to the use of effective use of communication in negative manipulation of followers.

Unique contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The paper sheds light on the role that communication plays in leadership. Discursive leadership is an additional theoretical dimension to leadership styles, types and dimensions. Policy makers may prescribe the need for discursive leadership in the various policy documents such as the constitution sections which advocate for leadership and governance among public and private institutions. Leaders in all fora could apply discursive leadership in a bid to improve leader-follower performance outcomes.

Keywords: *Leadership, Leader, Leadership Psychology, Discursive Leadership, Communication, Transformational Leadership*

1.0 DEFINITIONS: TRADITIONAL AND COMMUNICATION CENTERED

From the onset, I must say that leadership is a term that has received different and varying definitions in today's literature from both leadership psychology and lately discursive leadership approach— meaning that there is no one definition that is considered classical. The definitions that I am going to present here situate leadership from the traditional perspective then later on I will compare and contrast them with those that are communication centered. To begin with, Northouse (2004) points out that the following components can be identified as central to the phenomenon of leadership, namely: a) leadership is a process, b) leadership involves influence, c) leadership occurs within a group context, and d) leadership involves goal attainment. Thus, based on those components, Northouse defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). Similarly, Daft (2011) defines leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purposes” (p.5).

Northouse (2004) argues that defining leadership as a **process** means that it is not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader, but it is an exchange that occurs between leaders and their followers. He goes on to say “process” implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers. It emphasizes that leadership is not a linear, one-way event but rather an interactive event” (p.3). In the same vein, Fairhurst (2007) argues that leadership is a **process** of influence and meaning management among actors that advances a task or goal. Leadership involved influence component means that it is concerned with how the leader affects followers. Daft (2011) argues, “*influence* means that the relationship among people is not passive; however, also inherent in this definition is the concept that influence is multidirectional and noncoercive” (pp. 5-6). Slightly, Fairhurst's definition brings in an aspect of communication, that is, ‘meaning management’ which is missing in Northouse's definition. Fairhurst (2007) points out that leadership, as influence and meaning management, need not be performed by only one individual appointed to a given role; it may shift and distribute itself among several organizational members. Vroom and Jago (2007) define leadership as a “process of motivating people to work together collaboratively to accomplish great things” (p. 18). To summarize, Northouse (2009) says, “The meaning of leadership is complex and includes many dimensions. For some people, leadership is a trait or ability, for others it is a skill or behavior, and for still others leadership is a relationship. Defining leadership from the communication perspective, the authors tend to show that what the leader does is influenced and delivered through the communication process, a facet that is missing in the traditional definitions. That process is not mentioned. The *how* of leadership is brought out clearly in these definitions. On the other hand, Hackman and Johnson (2009) define leadership as “human (symbolic) communication, which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others to meet shared group goals and needs” (p. 11). To situate leadership more closely to communication, drawing from Fairhurst (2007), Barge & Fairhurst

(2008) observe, “we view leadership as a co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them” (p. 232). That means, leadership is a co-created process between the leader and the followers. In other words, leadership is not for the leader alone, but should be co-created between him or her and the followers. That’s how it ought to be.

According to Northouse (2004), “Leaders are the people who engage in leadership, and those individuals toward whom leadership is directed are referred to as followers” (p. 3). Yukl (1998) argues that when we think of leaders, we recall times of turbulence, conflict, innovation, and change. That’s the image the concept of a leader connotes. Northouse (2004) observes, “Although leaders and followers are closely linked, it is the leader who often initiates the relationship, creates the communication linkages, and carries the burden for maintaining the relationship” (p. 3). The two – leader and follower -- cannot do without the other. Looking at the above definitions, I would define leaders as men and women who have the credibility, capacity and commitment to influence people through communication around them toward higher standards of values, vision, and action whether in a group as small as a family, community or as large as an international forum.

2.0 PSYCHOLOGY LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

Three-Skill Approach: Based on field research in administration and his own firsthand observations of executives in the workplace, Katz (1955) suggested that effective administration (i.e., leadership) depends on three basic types of personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual. Katz argues that these skills are quite different from traits or qualities of leaders. Northouse (2004, p. 36) made the distinction that skills imply what leaders can accomplish, whereas, traits imply who leaders are (i.e., their innate characteristics). Technical skill is having knowledge about and being proficient in a specific type of work or activity. It requires competencies in a specialized area, analytical ability, and the ability to use appropriate tools and techniques (Katz, 1955, cited by Northouse 2004, p. 36). On the other hand, human skill is having knowledge about and being able to work with people. It is quite different from technical skill, which has to do with working with things. Thus, human skills are “people skills”.

Northouse (2004) argues, “To be a leader with human skills means being sensitive to the needs and motivations of others, and taking into account others’ needs in one’s decision making. In short, human skill is the capacity to get along with others as you go about your work” (p. 37). On the other hand, conceptual skills are abilities to work with ideas and concepts. Whereas technical skills deal with things and human skills deal with people, conceptual skills involve the ability to work with ideas (Northouse 2004, p. 38). Thus a leader with conceptual skills is comfortable talking about the ideas that shape an organization and the intricacies involved. Closely related is the term “envision”. Hackman and Johnson (2004, p. 23) argue that the term, “envisioning” describes one additional conceptual activity needed for leadership.

Skills Model: This model was developed by Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Owen & Fleishman, (2000, p. 12) and was characterized as a capability model because it examines the relationship between a leader's knowledge and skills (i.e., capabilities) and the leader's performance. The skills approach suggests that many individuals have the potential for leadership. Again, this approach frames leadership as the capabilities (knowledge and skills) that make effective leadership (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding et al., 2000, p. 12, cited in Northouse 2004, pp. 39 - 40). The skills model is composed of five different components: 1) competencies, 2) individual attributes, 3) leadership outcomes, 4) career experience, and 5) environmental influences. These skills enable leaders to work with others to solve problems and to marshal support to implement change within an organization. In other words, these are the skills that are necessary to solve unique organizational problems.

Mumford and colleagues have delineated social judgment skills into the following categories: 1) perspective taking, 2) social perceptiveness, 3) behavioral flexibility, and 4) social performance. For leaders, perspective taking simply means understanding the attitudes that others have toward a particular problem or solution. It is empathy applied to problem-solving. It also means being sensitive to other people's perspectives and goals – being able to understand their point of view on different issues (Northouse, 2004, p. 42). Within the skills model, individual attributes also impact leadership skills. For that reason, individual attributes that have an impact on leadership skills and knowledge include: 1) general cognitive ability, 2) crystallized cognitive ability, 3) motivation, and 4) personality. Northouse (2004) argues that general cognitive ability can be thought of as a person's intelligence. It includes perceptual processing, information processing, general reasoning skills, creative and divergent thinking capacities, and memory skills. Crystallized cognitive ability, on the other hand refers to intellectual ability that is learned or acquired over time. It includes being able to comprehend complex information and learn new skills and information, as well as being able to communicate to others in oral and written forms. Concerning motivation, Northouse (2004, p. 45) observe that taken together, the three aspects of motivation , i.e., willingness, dominance, and social good, prepare people to become leaders.

Trait Approach: Northouse (2004, p. 4) points out that the nature of leadership can be understood by looking at the questions such as how leadership as a trait differs from leadership as a process; how appointed leadership differs from emergent leadership; and how concepts of power, coercion, and management differ from leadership. From the traits approach, Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 72) argue that early social scientists believed that leadership qualities were innate; an individual was either born with the traits needed to be a leader or he or she lacked the physiological and psychological characteristics necessary for successful leadership. This trait approach suggests that nature plays a key role in determining leadership potential. This is the early thinking by scholars that leaders are “born, not made.” This approach proposes that there are particular qualities that will tend to be associated with leaders and that will result in success in leadership activities.

Situational Approach: This approach suggests that the traits, skills, and behaviors necessary for effective leadership vary from situation to situation. Thus, a leader is not always successful in every situation. A leader's effectiveness depends on his or her personality, the behavior of followers, the nature of the task, and many other situational factors.

Functional Approach: The functional approach basically looks at the way leaders behave. The underlying assumption of the functional approach is that leaders perform certain functions that allow a group or organization to operate effectively. An individual is considered a leader if he or she performs these functions. This approach attempts to identify specific communicative behaviors associated with leadership (Hackman and Johnson 2009, p. 72).

Style Approach: The style approach focuses exclusively on what leaders do and how they act. It suggests that leaders have particular behavioral "styles" that make them more or less effective leaders. Northouse (2004, p. 65) points out that researchers studying the style approach determined that leadership is composed of essentially two general kinds of behaviors: *task behaviors* and *relationship behaviors*. Task behaviors facilitate goal accomplishment – they help group members to achieve their objectives, whereas relationship behaviors help subordinates feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation in which they find themselves. According to Miller (2009, p. 189), in recent years trait and style approaches have fallen into disfavor, as many scholars and practitioners are uncomfortable with the notion of a set list of specific characteristics that defines all leaders. Thus, the idea of having one "ideal" type of leader is contrary to much of our experience in which leaders work in different ways with different people.

Contingency Approach: When other approaches do not work, the leader should consider the contingency approach. This approach is based on the assumption that the relationship between leader behaviors and traits and effectiveness depends on characteristics of the particular situation the leader is in. Jex and Britt (2008, p. 310) point out that the task of a leader, according to the contingency approach, is to first "read" the situation to determine what behaviors would be most appropriate. Once this is determined, the leader has to adjust his or her behavior to meet the demands of the situation. Miller (2009, p. 190) observes that contingency theory would predict, for example, that a leader who likes to focus on tasks would be more effective in structured situations than a leader who likes to focus on relationships. Modern theories that have been developed in the last 30 years and are now considered leadership contingency theories include: 1) Fiedler's contingency theory, 2) Path-Goal theory, 3) Vroom-Yetton-Jago model, and 4) Leader-member-exchange (LMX) model. However, contingency approaches to leadership have their own flaws. This is because they all emphasize the characteristics and the style of the leader and the needs of particular situations. Thus, Miller (2009) point out that in the recent years a variety of models that look more closely at leadership as a process of communication and as a process of establishing relationships have been proposed. Some have referred to these models as the "New Leadership" paradigm (Bryman, 1992) or the

“neocharismatic” paradigm (House & Aditya, 1997). The shift of preference is transformational and neocharismatic leadership models. Unquestionably, transformational leaders to inspire and intellectually stimulate their followers, they must use communication skills.

3.0 LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: GENERAL AND DISCURSIVE APPROACHES

The most effective leadership communication style, according to Black and McCauley (1964) cited by Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 56) is *team management* (9,9). Similarly, Miller (2009) argues that when evaluating leaders in terms of their “concern for production” and “concern for people”, the most effective leadership style is a team management style that maximizes both of these goals. According to House and Terence Mitchell, cited by Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 82), the ability to motivate followers is influenced by a leader’s communication style as well as by certain situational factors. Four communication styles are identified, namely: 1) Directive leadership, which involve procedure-related communication behavior that includes planning and organizing, task coordination, policy setting and other forms of specific guidance; 2) Supportive leadership, which deals with interpersonal communication focusing on concerns for the needs and well-being of followers and the facilitation of a desirable climate for interaction; 3) Participative leadership, which involves communication designed to solicit opinions and ideas from followers for the purpose of involving followers in decision making; and 4) Achievement-oriented leadership, which involves communication focusing on goal attainment and accomplishment, emphasizing the achievement of excellence by demonstrating confidence in the ability of followers to achieve their goals. These four communication styles are comparable to the three leadership communication styles: authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire. Out of the three, the democratic leader is the best because he or she engages in supportive communication that facilitates interaction between leaders and followers. The leader adopting the democratic communication style encourages follower involvement and participation in the determination of goals and procedures (Hackman and Johnson 2009, p. 42).

It makes sense that communication is the medium through which leadership occurs. Thus, without communication to aid the behavior of leaders in interpreting the environment or move them toward their final destination, leadership cannot occur. Therefore, communication is the primary mechanism through which leadership takes place.

Another significant concept in this discourse is emergent leadership. This type of leadership is not assigned by position, but rather it emerges over a period of time through communication. Fisher (1974) cited by Northouse (2004, pp. 5 - 6) observes that some of the positive communication behaviors that account for successful leader emergence include being verbally involved, being informed, seeking others’ opinions, initiating new ideas, and being firm but not rigid. In contrast, the discursive approach tends to situate communication in practical ways that leadership operates. Fairhurst (2007, p. 5) argues that discursive approaches to leadership tend to focus on how leadership is achieved or ‘brought off’ in discourse – just as Shotter (1993) portrayed managers as practical

authors, calling attention to their everyday language use, the performative role of language, and the centrality of language to processes of organizing. On the other hand, Barge & Fairhurst (2008, p. 227) argue that much as organizations are now being cast as discursive constructions (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004), leadership is also being viewed as a discursive construction and a legitimate alternative to leadership psychology's individualistic hold on all things leadership. The argument is that organizational actors operate in communication and through discourse. And that is why Barge & Fairhurst (2008) observe, "Leadership actors co-create their subjectivities – personal and professional identities, relationships, communities, and cultures – in communication through linguistic and embodied performances" (p. 228).

Barge and Fairhurst (2008, p. 236) suggest that a systemic constructionist account of leadership requires practical theorists to focus on three key discursive practices: 1) sensemaking, 2) positioning, and 3) play. These three tools inform systemic constructionist leadership analyses. In a nutshell, constructionist practical theory conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic evolutionary process that gives close attention to the living unity of persons, communication, action, meaning, and context.

Interestingly and true to my assessment, Fairhurst (2007) makes the observation which I agree with that discursive leadership and leadership psychology are thus usefully conceived as complementary Discourses or alternative ways of talking and knowing about leadership. Neither is right or wrong. The main distinction, Hostein & Gubrium (2000) cited in Fairhurst (2007, pp. 10-11) argue is that leadership psychology relies on a Western conception of human beings as unitary, coherent, and autonomous individuals, whose 'selves' are separable from society, whereas Giddens (1979) similarly cited in Fairhurst (2007, p. 11) argues that for most forms of discursive leadership, society and the individual are inseparable.

4.0 LEADERSHIP CATEGORIES: TRANSACTIONAL, TRANSFORMATIONAL AND CHARISMATIC

According to Cox (2001), there are two basic categories of leadership: *transactional* and *transformational*. The distinction between transactional and transformational leadership was first made by Downton (1973, as cited in Barnett, McCormick & Conners, 2001), but the idea gained little currency until James McGregor Burns' (1978) work on political leaders was published. Barnett et al. (2001) said that, "Burns distinguished between ordinary (*transactional*) leaders, who exchanged tangible rewards for the work and loyalty of followers, and extraordinary (*transformational*) leaders who engaged with followers, focused on higher order intrinsic needs, and raised consciousness about the significance of specific outcomes and new ways in which those outcomes might be achieved." Equally, Miller (2009, p. 191) observes that transactional leadership refers to a relationship in which there is an exchange of some sort between leaders and followers. For example, a managerial transactional leader exchanges a pay rise, a promotion, or verbal praise for hard work on a project. However, in contrast, transformational leaders, through communication processes, create a relationship between leaders and followers that help followers reach their full potential and has the potential of transforming both the

leader and the follower. Daft (2011, p. 362) state that the basis of transactional leadership is a transaction or exchange process between leaders and followers. Hackman and Johnson (2009, p.103) point out that transformational leadership is empowering and inspirational; it elevates leaders and followers to higher levels of motivation and morality. Daft (2011, p. 362) point out that transformational leadership is characterized by the ability to bring about significant change in both followers and the organization. The perspective of Hackman and Johnson concerning *transactional leadership* is that it is primarily “passive” in the sense that the behaviors most often associated with such leaders are establishing the criteria for rewarding followers and maintaining the status quo. The same argument is expanded by Burns (1990) cited by Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 103) that the result of transformational leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents.

Jex & Britt (2008) define transformational leadership as “the ability of a leader to articulate a clear and important vision that will motivate followers to strive to achieve” (p. 308). Interestingly, Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 104) point out that Ted Zorn (1991) discovered a relationship between the complexity of a leader’s communication system and the tendency to exhibit transformational leadership behavior. Zorn found those leaders with the most developed cognitive and communicative abilities were the most likely to be perceived as transformational by their followers. Gardner (2003) cited in Miller (2009, p. 191) argues that central to transformational leadership is the concept of *exemplification*. That is, leaders who want to instill the ideals of hard work and ethical behavior would do so by exemplifying those ideals in their own behaviors. Both words and deed are critical to the transformational leader-it is a model of “do as I say and as I do.”

Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 105) observe that five primary characteristics appear, in one form or another, in all of the classification systems dealing with extraordinary leaders. Thus, transformational leaders are creative, interactive, visionary, empowering, and passionate. Judge and Piccolo (2004) have argued that transformational leadership is composed of four primary dimensions. The first dimension is idealized influence (charisma). This component refers to leaders setting the example of exemplary performance and dedication to the organization through conviction and emotional investment. Jex and Britt (2008) point out, “Those who are charismatic tend to have a number of common traits: a captivating tone of voice, direct eye contact with the listener, animated facial expressions, and a powerful, confident, and dynamic communication style.” (p. 323). Daft (2011, p. 364) argue that charismatic leaders have an emotional impact on people and inspire them to do more than they normally do, despite obstacles and personal sacrifice. Thus, charismatic leaders have great “presence” and make a tremendous impression on those around them. The second dimension is inspirational motivation. One task that is often cited in this regard is providing a vision. Jex and Britt (2008) argue, “A vision applies to all members of the organization and can thus serve as a general ‘rallying point’ for everyone.” (pp. 323 - 324). The third dimension is intellectual

stimulation. This dimension refers to the transformational leader's ability to challenge subordinates and encourage them to be creative and take appropriate risks. Leaders may encourage subordinates to think outside the box in order to come up with innovative solutions that will instill a competitive advantage to the organization (Jex and Britt, 2008, p. 324). The final dimension is individualized consideration. Jex and Britt (2008) observe that this dimension refers to the leader's ability to attend to the needs of employees and make the employees feel understood and appreciated. In many ways this dimension incorporates aspects of LMX theory into what it means to be a transformational leader. Thus, transformational leaders tend to have a charismatic communication style (Jex and Britt, 2008, p. 324).

However, transformational leaders are not the only "best" leaders. Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 124) observe that charismatic leaders are the "superstars" of leadership. They say notable historical figures such Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, Henry Ford, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Walt Disney likely come to mind when we think of charisma. Max Weber, writing in the early twentieth century, was one of the first scholars to use the term "charisma" to describe secular leaders. The word charisma, which Weber borrowed from theology, means "gift" in Greek. It is the leaders who attracted devoted followers through their extraordinary powers that Weber described as charismatic. Hackman and Johnson (2004) point out, "Charismatic leaders excel in every function of human communication. They form strong emotional bonds with followers, emphasize transcendent visions, generate perceptions of confidence, communicate high expectations, and inspire others. However, charisma also has a dark side, often reflected in failure of vision, mis-articulation of goals, and poor management practices" (p. 120).

Burns (1978) saw four categories of transformational leadership typology which are relevant to this study. These were: intellectual, reform, revolutionary, and heroic (charismatic).

5.0 DISCUSSION & CRITICISM

Having seen all that transformation leadership can do, it has not escaped criticism; for instance, a key criticism from Hall, Johnson, Wysocki & Kepner, (2002) is that transformational leadership has within it potential for the abuse of power. Transformational leaders motivate followers by appealing to strong emotions regardless of the ultimate effects on followers and do not necessarily attend to positive moral values. As Stone et al., (2003) observed, "Transformational leaders can exert a very powerful influence over followers, who offer them trust and respect. Some leaders may have narcissistic tendencies, thriving on power and manipulation. Yukl (1989), described this as the dark side of charisma and goes on to note that for every example of a positive transformational leader demonstrating charismatic qualities (e.g., Mohandas [Mahatma] Gandhi), there is an equally negative example (e.g., Charles Manson) (p. 226 - 227).

The ultimate question is, what is the future of transformational leadership theory given these criticisms? With these perspectives in mind, Miller (2009, p. 191) briefly points that models of leadership have moved from relatively simplistic ideas about the traits and

styles of effective leaders, through models that suggest that different styles and skills are appropriate in different situations, to models that see leadership as a process of building relationships through interaction with followers and modeling desired values.

While there is plenty of literature especially from the leadership psychology's perspective explaining the potential contribution of leadership and leaders in an organization, future research need to focus more on discursive leadership approaches because the aspect of communication and how it is co-created and constructed is not well articulated. Although there is a lot of clamor for transformational leadership as the best leadership style, communication plays a key role in the way the leader communicates and implements strategic organizational goals with the followers. Communication provides the synergy.

Conclusion

My overall recommendation is that any future communication leadership research needs to look at both the leadership psychology approach and the discursive leadership approach and try to see which leadership aspects can be borrowed from each because the two are alternative ways of looking at leadership and the only difference is the perspective one looks at it. Discursive leadership lays a lot of emphasis on language and how messages are constructed whereas, leadership psychology is more on how leadership is done – the process. Leadership without communication is no leadership at all. All the leadership approaches discussed in this paper differ in the degree of importance they attach to communication. The theory that underscores the importance and power of communication in creating new ways of thinking and organizing collective behavior is transformational theory. The role of communication in this theory is evident in what the leader does. Through charisma, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation, transformational leaders have great potential to promote performance beyond expectations and to effect enormous changes within individuals, organizations, and nations. In simple terms, leaders need to be effective communicators.

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