Leadership: A Theoretical Approach

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All papers five pages or longer are required to have a table of contents. The table of contents should include each heading and subheading in the paper along with the page number indicating where the section starts.
Leadership has been a topic of discussion for many years, but systematic study of leadership did not begin until well into the twentieth century. The focus of this research has been determining leadership effectiveness by attempting to discover what traits, abilities, behaviors, types of power, or situational aspects affect how a leader is able to lead. This paper will look at these various theories of leadership addressed by researchers in an attempt to better understand what makes a good or effective leader.
Leadership has been a topic of human concern for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. It has excited interest among scholars and laypeople alike. It has probably been the subject of debate since the first two people came together for the purpose of completing a task. The term symbolizes images of powerful, dynamic, exciting men and women whose exploits and deeds formed the basis of many legends and myths throughout time and history. From the days of the famous Egyptian ruler, Cleopatra, to those of the infamous German dictator, Adolph Hitler, the subject of leadership has been something of an enigma. While some leaders have been credited with important world events, others have been ridiculed and blamed. According to Yukl (2002), “The widespread fascination with leadership may be because it is such a mysterious process, as well as one that touches everyone’s life” (p. 1).

Questions about leadership have long been a subject of speculation, but the systematic study of leadership did not begin until the 1930s. Since that time, leadership has been one of the most frequently studied phenomena in the social sciences ("Leadership," 1999, p. 490). The focus of much of the research has been on the determinants of leadership effectiveness as researchers have attempted to “discover what traits, abilities, behaviors, sources of power, or aspects of the situation determine how well a leader is able to influence followers and accomplish group objectives” (Yukl, 2002, p. 2). The reasons why some people emerge as leaders and the determinants of the way a leader acts are other important questions that have been researched, but the paramount concern, however, has been “leadership effectiveness” (Yukl, 2002, p. 2). Bass (1990) reviewed more than 3,000 studies on leadership and claimed the precise nature of leadership and its relationship to key criterion variables such as subordinate satisfaction, commitment, and performance is still uncertain. According to Bass (1990),
Nothing is supposed to be as practical as a good theory, but nothing seems more impractical than a bad one; a theory may be good for one purpose and bad for another, for theory is supposed to be a way of trying to understand the facts. Unfortunately, leadership theories sometimes obscure the facts. Much effort then has to be expended in coping with obscurity. (p. 37)

Some progress has been made in probing the mysteries surrounding leadership, but many questions remain unanswered. Obviously, there is a lot of ground to cover.

**Definitions of Leadership**

Researchers seem to disagree on the definition of leadership. Most of the disagreement stems from the fact that leadership is a complex phenomenon involving the leader, the followers, the situation, and the goals or objectives that are to be obtained. Some leadership researchers have focused on the personality, physical traits, or behaviors of the leader while others have studied how aspects of the situation affect the leader’s behavior. Some have even suggested that there is no such thing as leadership—the situation may have a much greater impact on whether the organization succeeds or fails than does any individual, including the leader (Meindl & Erlich, 1987). Thus, leadership researchers have defined leadership in many different ways:

- Leadership is “the behavior of an individual . . . directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal” (Hemphill & Coons, 1957, p. 57).
- “Leadership is exercised when persons . . . mobilize . . . institutional, political, psychological, and other resources to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 18).
- Leadership is “the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement” (Rauch & Behling, 1984, p. 46).
• Leadership “is the ability to step outside the culture . . . to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive” (Schein, 1992, p. 2).

• Leadership is “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization . . .” (House et al., 1999, p. 184).

Stogdill (1974) concluded that “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 259). Although there are many and varied definitions of leadership, most reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby a person intentionally influences others to voluntarily behave in such a way as to accomplish a goal or an objective and directs the organization in a way to make it more efficient and effective. Thus, three important points to consider are (1) leadership is a social influence process, and in order for it to occur, there must be a leader and a follower; (2) the action or behavior performed by the follower is voluntary as opposed to behavior that is performed due to formal authority or coercion; and (3) the result of leadership is follower behavior that is objective- or goal-oriented in an organizational environment. In simple terms, it is a process of influencing others toward achieving group goals.

Although there are differences and disagreement among researchers about the identification of leaders and leadership processes, much of the literature does indicate, however, that leadership has always been considered a prerequisite for organizational success. “Because no one yet has been able to demonstrate through research or logical argument that leadership ability is a handicap to a manager, we can state that all managers should ideally be leaders” (Robbins, 1994, p. 495). Nadler and Tushman (1990) provide further support by stating, “Given
issues such as the increased capability afforded by enhanced communication technology and the rise of international business, leadership is more important now than ever before” (p. 77).

**Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership occurs when leaders and followers are in some type of exchange relationship which satisfies needs for one or both parties. The exchange could be economic, political, or psychological in nature; and examples might include exchanging money for work, votes for political favors, and loyalty for consideration. Transactional leaders help organizations achieve their current objectives more efficiently by linking job performance to valued rewards or by ensuring that employees have the needed resources to get the job done (Avolio & Bass, 1988).

Transactional leadership is very common but tends to be transitory in that there may be no enduring purpose to hold parties together once a transaction is made. Burns (1978) noted that while this type of leadership could be quite effective, it did not result in organizational or societal change and, instead, tended to perpetuate and legitimize the status quo. Thus, transactional leaders view management as a series of transactions in which they use their legitimate, reward, and coercive powers to give commands and exchange rewards for services rendered.

**Transformational Leadership**

The transformational process is currently the most popular leadership perspective (McShane & Von Glinow, 2005), and it moves beyond the more traditional transactional approach to leadership. Transformational leadership is related to charisma in that these leaders motivate people to transcend their personal interests for the sake of the larger community (Bass, 1985). It also produces levels of subordinate effort and performance that go beyond what would occur with a transactional approach alone (Robbins, 1994). Moreover, transformational leadership is more than charisma. While the purely charismatic leader may want followers to
adopt his or her world view and go no further, the transactional leader “will attempt to instill in followers the ability to question not only established views but eventually those established by the leader” (Avolio & Bass, 1990, p. 23).

According to Bennis and Nanus (1985) four skills are required in order for the transformational leader to be successful—(1) a strategic vision or a goal that elicits people’s attention; (2) an ability to successfully communicate that vision through words, manner, or symbolism; (3) the capacity to build trust by being consistent, dependable, and persistent; and (4) the capability of positive self-regard by striving for success (p. 27). The use of these skills builds follower commitment and energizes them to adopt the leader’s vision as their own. They also perform their jobs better, engage in more organizational citizenship behaviors, and make better or more creative decisions (McShane & VonGlinow, 2005). Thus, transformational leadership “is closer to the prototype of leadership that people have in mind when they describe their ideal leader and is more likely to provide a role model with which subordinates want to identify” (Bass, 1990, p. 54).

Summary

It is clear that leadership is a complicated phenomenon that is the subject of much debate and research over time. Perhaps “the importance of leadership is best expressed by Napoleon who quipped he would rather have an army of rabbits lead by a lion than an army of lions lead by a rabbit” (Bass, 1990, p. 6). There is evidence that the emergence and continued success of a leader is a complex function of his or her characteristics, the characteristics of his or her followers, and the characteristics of the situation. Some of the more important personal qualities of a leader seem to be high intelligence, need for power, energy level, charisma, and concern for his or her followers. Some autocratic leaders make all the decisions for their followers, whereas
others take a supportive approach, working actively with followers to ensure that all group members have a chance to contribute to a task. According to the transactional model of leadership, the effectiveness of these different behaviors and decision styles is contingent on attributes of the followers and of the situation.

As a discipline, leadership faces new challenges. Leaders of the future will continue to face the obstacles of significantly changing organizations and environments. Some of these changes include the transformation of the American economy from one based upon industrialization to one based upon knowledge and the challenge of other economies—in particular, the Chinese and the others of the Pacific Rim. The accelerating trend toward positioning organizations to be more competitive in a global environment will be a primary contributor to the need for organizational leadership in the future. Another challenge is the new role of leaders, managers, and management itself as more women, Hispanics, African Americans, other minorities, and workers with different expectations enter the workforce.

Future leaders who think intelligently and creatively, empower and treat employees as their organizations’ most important resources, and adapt to the changing conditions of an increasingly fluid environment will ensure their survival and success. As a result, the issue of leadership will no doubt receive more attention from researchers. It is certain that more research is needed to develop insights about how to be a successful leader.


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