An Exploration of Leadership Thought and an Introduction to Proactive Leadership in the Context of Managing Change and Diversity

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ABSTRACT

The concept of leadership has fascinated men arguably since the beginning of our existence. Intellectuals such as Stogdill, Lewin, Burns, House, Bass, and many others have all contributed to the existing body of knowledge on leadership. Scholars have been consistently seeking to unlock the mysteries of leadership, and throughout the 20th century there have been numerous approaches to it. The writers of this paper will explore the historical foundations of various approaches to leadership thought, in an attempt to use it as a base for future inquiry into the phenomenon that has been a source of intrigue for centuries. The construct Proactive Leadership will also be introduced as a new way to examine leadership in the context of managing change and diversity.

Keywords: Contingency Theory; Environmental Leadership; Servant Leadership; Transformational Leadership, Proactive Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Like Sir Galahad searching for the Holy Grail, scholars have been seeking to unlock the mysteries of leadership, and throughout the 20th century, there have been numerous approaches to it. Despite the multitude of ways that leadership has been conceptualized, several components can be identified as central to the phenomenon of leadership. They are a) leadership is a process, b) leadership involves influence, c) leadership occurs within a group context, and d) leadership involves goal attainment (Northouse, 2001, p.3). During the course of this research, the writers will explore the historical foundations of various approaches to leadership thought in an attempt to use it as a base for future inquiry into the phenomenon.

Leadership Trait Theory

From the turn of the century through the 1940’s, leadership research was dominated by attempts to show that leaders possessed some intrinsic quality or characteristic that differentiated them from followers (Jago, 1982, p. 317). In the early 1900’s, leadership traits were studied to determine what made certain people great leaders. The theories that were developed were called great man theories because they focused on identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political, and military leaders. It was believed that people were born with these traits and that only the great people possessed them (Northouse, 2001, p.15).

In the mid 1900’s, the trait approach was challenged by research that questioned the universality of leadership traits. In a major review in 1948, Stogdill suggested that no consistent set of traits differentiated leaders from non leaders across a variety of situations (Northouse, 2001, p.15). The
research on traits spanned the entire 20th century and a good overview of this approach is found in two surveys completed by Stogdill in 1948 and 1974. In his first survey, Stogdill analyzed and synthesized more that 124 trait studies that were conducted between 1904 and 1947. The findings of the first survey identified a group of important leadership traits that were related to how individuals in various groups became leaders.

In his second study, published in 1974, he analyzed another 163 studies that were completed between 1948 and 1970, and he compared the findings of these studies to the findings he had reported in his first survey (Bass and Stogdill, 1981, p. 81). The second survey was more balanced in its description of the role of traits in leadership. While the first survey implied that leadership is determined principally by situational factors and not personality factors, the second survey argued more moderately that both personality and situational factors were determinants of leadership (Bass and Stogdill, 1981, p. 81). Mann (1959) conducted a similar study that examined more than 1,400 findings regarding personality and leadership in small groups, but he placed less emphasis on how situational factors influenced leadership. Although tentative in his conclusions, Mann suggested that personality traits could be used to discriminate leaders from non leaders. His results identified leaders as strong in the following traits: intelligence, masculinity, adjustment, dominance, extroversion, and conservatism (Northouse, 2001, p. 17). Another review argues for the importance of leadership traits; Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) contended that “it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people” (p.59). From a qualitative synthesis of earlier research, Kirkpatrick and Locke postulated that leaders differ from non leaders on six traits: drive, the desire to lead, honesty and integrity, self confidence, cognitive ability, and knowledge of the business. According to these writers, individuals can be born with these traits, or they can learn them, or both (Northouse, 2001, p. 18).

Ohio State and the University of Michigan Leadership Studies

Some of the first studies to be done were conducted at Ohio State University in the late 1940’s based on the findings of Stogdill’s work, which pointed to the importance of considering more than leaders’ traits in leadership research. At about the same time, another group of researchers at the University of Michigan were conducting a series of studies that explored how leadership functioned in small groups (Northouse, 2001, p. 35). Since the personality trait approach was deemed to be fruitless, an attempt was made to study the behaviors rather than the traits of leaders (Bass, 1981, p.358). This analysis was conducted by having subordinates complete questionnaires about their leaders. On the questionnaires, subordinates had to identify the number of times their leaders engaged in certain behavior types. The original questionnaire that was used in these studies was constructed from a list of more than 1,800 items describing different aspects of leader behavior. From this long list of items, a questionnaire composed of 150 questions was formulated, and it was called the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) (Stodgill, 1963, p. 1). Researchers found that subordinates’ responses on the questionnaire clustered around two general types of leader behaviors: initiating structure and consideration. Initiating structure behaviors were essentially task behaviors, including such acts as organizing work, giving structure to the work context, defining role responsibilities, and scheduling work activities. Consideration behaviors were essentially relationship behaviors, and included building camaraderie, respect, trust, and liking between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2001, p.36).

While researchers at Ohio State were developing the LBDQ, researchers at the University of Michigan were also exploring leadership behavior, giving special attention to the impact of leaders’ behaviors on the performance of small groups. The program of research at Michigan identified two types
of leadership behaviors called employee orientation and production orientation. Employee orientation is
described as behavior by a supervisor which indicates that he feels that the “human relations” aspect of
the job is quite important, and that he considers the employees as human beings of intrinsic importance,
takes an interest in them, and accepts their individuality and personal needs. Production orientation
stresses production and the technical aspects of the job, with employees as means for getting work done;
it seems to combine the Ohio State dimensions of initiating structure and production emphasis. Originally
conceived to be opposite poles of the same continuum, employee orientation and production orientation
were later re-conceptualized, on the basis of further data, as representing independent dimensions

Contingency Theory

This theory was the first to specify how situational variables interact with leader personality and
behavior. Fiedler’s contingency theory posited a two way interaction between a measure of leader task-
motivation versus relationship motivation, and a measure of what was initially referred to as “situational
favorableness” and later relabeled “situational control” (House and Aditya, p. 421). Contingency theory is
a leader match theory, which means it tries to match leaders to appropriate situations. It is called
contingency because it suggests that a leader’s effectiveness depends on how well the leader’s style fits
the context.

Within the framework of contingency theory, leadership styles are described as task motivated or
relationship motivated. Task motivated leaders are concerned primarily with reaching a goal, whereas
relationship motivated leaders are concerned with developing close personal relations. To measure leader
styles, Fiedler developed the Least Preferred Co-Worker (LPC) scale. Leaders who score high on this
scale are described as relationship motivated, and those who score low on the scale are identified as task
motivated (Northouse, 2001, pp. 75 and 76).

Contingency theory suggests that situations can be characterized by assessing three factors: a)
leader-member relations, b) task structure, and c) position power. Leader-member relations refer to the
group atmosphere and to the degree of confidence, loyalty, and attraction that followers feel for their
leader. The second situational variable, task structure, refers to the degree to which the requirements of a
task are clear and spelled out. Tasks that are completely structured tend to give more control to the leader,
whereas vague and unclear tasks lessen the leader’s control and influence. Power position, the third
characteristic of situations, refers to the amount of authority a leader has to reward or to punish followers.
It includes the legitimate power individuals acquire as a result of the position they hold in an organization
(Northouse, 2001, pp. 76 and 77).

Path-Goal Theory

The scope of path-goal theory reflects the dominant paradigm of the study of leadership through
about 1975. Path-goal theory is a dyadic theory of supervision. It concerns relationships between formally
appointed superiors and subordinates in their day-to-day functioning. It is concerned with how formally
appointed superiors affect the motivation and satisfaction of subordinates. It is a dyadic theory of
supervision in that it does not address the effect of leaders on groups or work units, but rather the effects
of superiors on subordinates.

Consistent with the dominant leadership paradigm of the time, path-goal theory is primarily a
theory of task and person oriented supervisory behavior. Also consistent with the dominant paradigm, it
does not concern the leadership of entire organizations, emergent-informal leadership; leadership as it
affects several levels of managers and subordinates in organizations, political behavior of leaders, strategic leadership of organizations, or leadership as it relates to change (House, 1996, p.324). In the initial version of the theory it was asserted that "the motivational function of the leader consists of increasing personal payoffs to subordinates for work-goal attainment and making the path to these payoffs easier to travel by clarifying it, reducing roadblocks and pitfalls, and increasing the opportunities for personal satisfaction en route." (House, 1971, p. 324).

Path goal theory is about how leaders motivate subordinates to accomplish designated goals. The stated goal of this theory is to enhance employee performance and employee satisfaction by focusing on employee motivation. The path goal theory emphasizes the relationship between the leader’s style and the characteristics of the subordinates and the work setting. The underlying assumption of path goal theory is derived from expectancy theory, which suggests that subordinates will be motivated if they think they are capable of performing their work, if they believe their efforts will result in a certain outcome, and if they believe that the payoffs for doing their work are worthwhile.

According to House and Mitchell (1974), leadership generates motivation when it increases the number and kinds of payoffs that subordinates receive from their work. Leadership also motivates when it makes the path to the goal clear and easy to travel through coaching and direction, when it removes obstacles and roadblocks to attaining the goal, and when it makes the work itself more personally satisfying. The path goal theory is designed to explain how leaders can help subordinates along the path to their goals by selecting specific behaviors that are best suited to subordinates’ needs and to the situation in which subordinates are working. By choosing the appropriate style, leaders increase their subordinates’ expectations for success and satisfaction.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader member exchange (LMX) is a theory about the development and effects of separate dyadic relationships between superiors and subordinates. This theory has the potential to be a theory of systems of dyadic relationships, but further theoretical development is required for the fulfillment of this potential. The theory prescribes a high degree of mutual influence and obligation between superiors and subordinates, and asserts that such a relationship will result in several important positive outcomes such as lower turnover, and higher subordinate performance, citizenship behavior, satisfaction and commitment.

The distinguishing feature of the LMX theory is the examination of relationships, as opposed to behavior or traits of either followers or leaders. Proponents of the theory argue that the quality of “mature” superior-subordinate dyadic relationships would be more predictive of positive organizational outcomes than traits or behaviors of superiors (House and Aditya, 1997, p. 430). LMX theory takes another approach and conceptualizes leadership as a process that is centered in the interactions between leaders and followers. Prior to LMX theory, researchers treated leadership as something leaders did toward all of their followers. This assumption implied that leaders treated followers in a collective way, as a group, using an average leadership style. LMX theory challenged this assumption and directed researchers’ attention to the differences that might exist between the leader and each of her or his followers (Northouse, 200, p. 112).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and
when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self interest for the good of the group. Transformational leaders achieve these results in one or more ways: They may be charismatic to their followers and thus inspire them; they may meet the emotional needs of each employee; and/or they may intellectually stimulate employees (Bass, 1990, p. 21).

Transformational leaders do more with colleagues and followers than set up simple exchanges or agreements. They behave in ways to achieve superior results by employing one or more of the four core components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

**Idealized influence:** Transformational leaders behave in ways that allow them to serve as role models for their followers. The leaders are admired, respected, and trusted. Followers identify with the leaders and want to emulate them.

**Inspirational motivation:** Transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers’ work. Team spirit is aroused. Enthusiasm and optimism are displayed. Leaders get followers involved in envisioning attractive future states; they create clearly communicated expectations that followers want to meet and also demonstrate commitment to goals and the shared vision.

**Intellectual stimulation:** Transformational leaders stimulate their followers’ efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. Creativity is encouraged. There is no public criticism of individual members’ mistakes. New ideas and creative problem solutions are solicited from followers, who are included in the process of addressing problems and finding solutions.

**Individualized consideration:** Transformational leaders pay special attention to each follower’s needs for achievement and growth by acting as a coach or mentor. Followers and colleagues are developed to successively higher levels of potential. Individualized consideration is practiced when new learning opportunities are created along with a supportive climate (Bass and Riggio, 2006, pp. 5-7).

In developing the construct, Burns (1978) drew from the literature on traits, leadership styles, leader-member exchange research, as well as his own observations, and put forth the idea of a transformational and transactional leadership style. Burns considered the transformational leader to be distinct from the transactional leader, where the latter is viewed as a leader who initiates contact with subordinates in an effort to exchange something of value, such as rewards for performance, mutual support, or bilateral disclosure. At the other pole of the leadership style dimension, Burns viewed the transformational leader as one who engages with others in such a way that the leader and the follower raise one another to a higher level of motivation and morality.

The most widely used measure of transformational leadership is the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Bass viewing the transformational and transactional leadership constructs as complementary constructs, developed the MLQ to assess the different leadership styles. Bass (1985) viewed the transformational/transactional leadership paradigm as being comprised of complementary rather than polar constructs. He integrated the transformational and transactional styles by recognizing that both styles may be linked to the achievement of desired goals and objectives. In this view, the transformational leadership style is complementary to the transactional style and likely to be ineffective in the total absence of a transactional relationship between leaders and subordinate (Lowe, et al, p. 386).
Philosophy of Servant Leadership

In these early years of the twenty-first century, we are beginning to see that traditional, autocratic, and hierarchal modes of leadership are yielding to a new model; one based on teamwork and community, one that seeks to involve others in decision making, one strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, one that is attempting to enhance the personal growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of our institutions. This emergent approach to leadership and service is called servant leadership.

The words servant and leader are usually thought of as being opposites. When two opposites are brought together in a creative and meaningful way, a paradox emerges. The basic idea of servant leadership is logical and intuitive. Since the time of the industrial revolution, managers have tended to view people as objects; institutions have considered as cogs within a machine. In the past few decades we have witnessed a shift in that long held view. Standard practices are rapidly shifting toward the ideas put forward by Robert Greenleaf, Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, Max DePree, Margaret Wheatley, Ken Blanchard and many others who suggest that there is a better way to manage our organizations in the twenty-first century (Spears and Lawrence, 2001, p. 2).

An examination of the variety of concepts used to describe servant leadership could suggest that what appears to be a relatively straight-forward concept is either quite complicated or lends itself to elaboration with a wide variety of terms. For example, scholars describe servant leadership as behaviors or leader characteristics including humility, relational power, service-orientation, follower development, encouragement of follower autonomy, altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom and organizational stewardship (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006). Despite the vast array of terms various formulations of servant leadership have employed, three major descriptors originally employed by Greenleaf (1977) are consistently cornerstones of servant leadership. These are: service – to followers, an organization or society. Based on the alternative descriptions of servant leadership noted above, this dimension may include service-orientation, follower development, organizational stewardship, follower empowerment, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, helping subordinates grow and putting subordinates first. Humility – putting the success of followers ahead of the leader’s personal gain. This dimension may include relational power, altruistic calling, emotional healing, moral love, altruism, credibility, voluntary subordination, authentic self, transcendental spirituality, emotional healing, and behaving ethically from the various alternative servant leadership formulations above. Vision – having foresight combined with the ability to communicate vision to, and influence followers in, developing a shared vision for an organization. This dimension includes wisdom, persuasive mapping, influence, transforming influence, credibility, creating value for the community, and conceptual skills from the various alternative servant leadership formulations (Hale and Fields, 2007, p. 399).

Environmental Leadership

Individual environmental visionaries can be found working independently, in grassroots groups, in private business, in government institutions, and in nonprofit organizations. In private and public organizations, these environmental leaders are found throughout the ranks. Environmental leaders infuse their desire to protect the natural environment into their decision making and action processes (Flannery & May, 1994, p. 202). Environmental leaders inspire a shared vision of the organization as environmentally sustainable, creating or maintaining green values throughout the enterprise. Such values include stewardship in regard to ecology, frugality and sufficiency in regard to resources, fairness and appropriateness in relation to society, and accountability in regard to process (Dechant and Altman, 1994, p. 9).
Environmental leadership in organizations is better understood as a process that involves two levels of influence (individual and organizational) and two types of influence relationships (internal and external). Environmental leadership is more likely to be successful if leaders understand how influence processes at the individual and organizational level are interrelated. The slow process of gaining converts one individual at a time is unlikely to accomplish major change in a timely way unless there are highly visible indicators of progress in the form of policies, programs, and budgets. However, environmental policies and programs are unlikely to be approved and implemented unless environmental leaders build a coalition of supporters through a process of interpersonal influence with individuals and small groups of people in key positions inside and outside the organization (Portugal & Yukl, 1994, pp.271-273).

Three behaviors that appear relevant for environmental leadership are: articulating an appealing vision with environmental elements, changing perceptions about environmental issues, and taking symbolic actions to demonstrate personal commitment to environmental issues (Portugal & Yukl, 1994, pp.274). An environmental leadership strategy can provide competitive advantage for a company in a number of ways such as by catering for a demand in the marketplace for environmentally responsible products or services ahead of its rivals and also by generating cost savings from practices that conserve energy and materials and reduce waste (Robinson & Clegg, 1998, p. 6).

**Proactive Leadership in the Context of Managing Change and Diversity**

There is still a lot of work to be done in terms of finding out effective ways of managing change and diversity, and determining which leadership theory is most effective in certain situations. Leadership has a key role to play, both in setting direction, inspiring change throughout the organization and ensuring that change is implemented. In achieving world-class performance, leaders have a role in developing a number of critical competencies related to helping focus individual attention on organizational mind-sets, facilitating strategy implementation, and building change capability (Oakland & Tanner, 2007). Individuals who possess a proactive personality and a high internal locus of control are needed to affect the kind of change that is needed for organizational success.

**Proactive Leadership**

Bateman and Crant (1993) developed the proactive personality concept, defining it as a relatively stable tendency to effect environmental change that differentiates people based on the extent to which they take action to influence their environments. Individuals with a prototypical proactive personality identify opportunities and act on them, show initiative, take action, and persevere until meaningful change occurs. In contrast, people who are not proactive exhibit the opposite patterns: they fail to identify, let alone seize, opportunities to change things. Less proactive individuals are passive and reactive, preferring to adapt to circumstances rather than change them. (Crant, 2000, p. 439).

As work becomes more dynamic and decentralized, proactive behavior and initiative become even more critical determinants of organizational success. For example, as new forms of management are introduced that minimize the surveillance function, companies will increasingly rely on employees’ personal initiative to identify and solve problems (Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997). Crant (2000) defined proactive behavior as taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones; it involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions. Employees can engage in proactive activities as part of their in-role behavior in which they fulfill basic job requirements.

**Proactive Leadership** occurs when the leader takes the initiative to identify opportunities to influence meaningful change in the environment that will result in organizational performance. Proactive
leaders will be able to identify the benefits of implementing diversity initiatives in organizations and other change interventions that will result in innovation, creativity, production and performance. In a recent study McKay et al (2008) assessed whether diversity climate moderated whether mean racial-ethnic differences in employee sales performance. One of the study’s hypotheses predicted diversity climate to moderate mean racial-ethnic differences in sales performance such that (a) Black-White and (b) Hispanic-White mean differences in sales performance would be largest in stores with less supportive diversity climates and smallest with highly pro-diversity climates. The study found that diversity climate was related to greater increases in sales per hour among blacks and Hispanics, relative to whites.

**Proposition 1:** Proactive leaders will be motivated to take action to ensure that there is a supportive diversity climate in their organization that will facilitate each employee’s work in an environment that is conducive to performance.

Interventions to achieve the proposition include the design of diversity initiatives which help create work environments consistent with the organizational value on diversity.

Employees might engage in career management activities by identifying and acting on opportunities to change the scope of their jobs or move to more desirable divisions of the business (Crant, 2000). This suggests that proactive leaders would take an active role in ensuring that their employees are exposed to training initiatives that will develop them as employees.

**Proposition 2:** Proactive leaders will be motivated to take a greater interest in the career development of their employees so that they have opportunities to take advantage of training interventions that will help them become more productive employees.

Interventions to achieve the proposition involve conducting needs assessments that will aid in identifying and designing training initiatives which help the employees perform more efficiently and effectively.

Proactive individuals will be more satisfied with their jobs because they will remove obstacles preventing satisfaction. They will also be more satisfied with their careers because they will introduce new ideas, have an understanding of company politics, and update their skills, which can lead to greater success (Seibert et al., 2001).

**Proposition 3:** Proactive leaders will improve organizational commitment and job satisfaction through the elimination of hindrance stressors that cause job dissatisfaction among their employees.

Proactive leaders will have a desire to increase organizational commitment and job satisfaction throughout their organization and they will do so by eliminating hindrance stressors. Hindrance stressors are viewed by employees as obstacles to personal growth and task accomplishment. They are also positively related to turnover (Podsakoff, et al., 2007).

Crant’s (1995) longitudinal analysis of real estate agents found that proactive personality accounted for 8% of variance in objective measures of job performance, including the number of homes sold and commission income.

**Proposition 4:** Proactive leadership will be related to job performance in a variety of work contexts.

Proactive leaders will be motivated to take greater initiative in achieving organizational performance and other positive outcomes that result in organizational success.

Organizational support and organizational culture are some important contextual factors that will influence whether an individual becomes an effective proactive leader. Organizational support theory supposes that employees personify the organization, infer the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being, and reciprocate such perceived support with increased
commitment, loyalty and performance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organizational culture has been defined as relatively stable beliefs, attitudes, and values that are held in common among organizational members, shared normative beliefs and shared behavioral expectations, or a particular set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that characterizes the way individuals and groups interact in progressing toward a common goal (Kwantes & Boglarsky, 2007). The organizational culture should be congruent with the individual’s proactive leadership style for them to be motivated to display the proactive behaviors that are necessary for organizational performance. The model listed illustrates the antecedents and outcomes of proactive leadership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the overall purpose of this article was to give a brief overview of some foundational and current leadership theories and to introduce proactive leadership as a new construct. A proactive leader identifies opportunities, acts on them, and challenges the status quo, in order to create a productive, yet nurturing environment, which is inclusive to all forms of diversity, which in turn inspires performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment amongst employees. Proactive leaders are needed in the 21st century to create the kind of change that is needed in organizations in order to maintain a competitive advantage. It is our hope that this article will provide the framework for organizations to support and promote proactive leadership in its managers and employees.

REFERENCES


