Leadership Philosophy

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Throughout the past eight weeks we analyzed and read about many different theories on what leadership is. In looking at the types of leadership theories, we mainly read Peter G. Northouse’s fifth edition of Leadership. The book follows a fairly easy path. The first four chapters discuss leadership from the leader’s perspective, such as the traits, skills, and styles of leading. The second set of chapters focuses on the follower and how the leader must carefully examine those who he or she is leading and adjust appropriately. The third set of chapters tends to be more complete, looking at who a leader is and who the followers are based in a necessarily important concept: context. I found it rather easy to critique the first few chapters, but as the book progressed each subsequent chapter became more complete, allowing for more interpretations of the theory compared to the almost black and white nature of the first few chapters.

We began from a simple and well known theory: the trait theory. This follows the common notion that leaders are born, not made. People with a certain winning set of innate characteristics are naturally going to be good leaders. Some of these are included in the “big five” traits, being extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, low neuroticism, and agreeableness. Traits like self-confidence and determination are also indicative of a leader (Northouse 2: Trait Approach). While I do find this theory to be deeply flawed, there is some truth to it. I believe that the traditional leader, the leader commanding the masses, is helped by having some of these traits. For certain situations a leader almost has to have these traits. But that is the key: certain situations. I believe that personality can change over time, so it may be beneficial for me as a leader to keep these traits in mind if my first approach is not effective.

The second theory covered is skill theory, which like the trait theory focuses on the leader. A certain leader need not have a certain personality, but instead knowledge and abilities, categorized into technical (job) skill, human skill, and conceptual (enacting plans, ideas) skill (Northouse 3: Skills Approach). The major flaw of this trait is that it fails to look at who the leader is leading and the situation the leader is in. In a traditional business setting with little conflict, this technique would work great. For me, this theory can be a good generalization of leadership if technical, human, and conceptual skills are taken as broad categories.

The last of the leader-focused theories is style approach, which analyses the task and relationship behaviors of a leader. A whole ranking occurs based on how proficient a leader is in task behaviors compared to relationship behaviors (Northouse 4: Style Approach). However, like the other theories in its category, style approach tends to place an almost permanent label on the leader. Most leaders can and do change according to what is necessary at the time. But I was able to take this approach and try to categorize myself in some situations that I have found myself in, such as my previous work experience or extracurricular leadership.

Situational approach belongs in the next category which focuses on the followers. Followers naturally progress or regress through a series of categorizations, D1, D2, D3, and D4. They typically begin as needing high directive and low support. They move on to high directive and high support, then to low directive high support, and finally the follower is moved into low supportive and low directive (Northouse 5: Situational approach). The series is usually taken in a line, although jumps are recognized by the author. What was discussed in class intrigued me more. There is not always this natural progression forward; it can be backward, jumpy, or stalled depending on the individual. This theory makes the most sense in a business setting and is very understandable there, but can be applied with leeway to other leadership situations. For me, this theory symbolizes the need to understand where the people are in relation to what the task is.

Contingency Theory is based on matching leadership styles to appropriate followers. Through a system called the LPC (least preferred coworker), leadership styles are determined to be either task or relationship motivated. High LPCs have good people skills, while low LPCs mean the leader is more task focused (Northouse 6: Contingency Theory). The best thing about this theory is that it emphasizes the situation, but unfortunately is fails to recognize flexibility in a leader’s style, which I believe is necessary for an effective leader.

Path Goal theory is perhaps the most follower oriented. It takes a look at a very important aspect of effective leadership: motivation. This theory is all about finding ways to motivate and maintaining this motivation in the followers. Depending on the situation of the followers, there are a variety of methods to re-motivate followers, such as directive, supportive, participative, and achievement oriented styles (Northouse 7: Path-goal Theory). I find that this theory is incredibly important because human motivation is such a powerful force. Being able to reach the followers on a motivational level is essential for maximum outcome.

Leader Member Exchange Theory is quite simple. It focuses on the interactions between leaders and followers. This theory is unique in that it looks at the relationship between leader and follower as the focal point (Northouse 8: Leader Member Exchange Theory). I find this theory important because I tend to be more of a relationship oriented person according to my personality. I may be biased but I think that this theory contains truth in emphasizing the importance of relationships, no matter what level.

The final section of theories contains what I believe to be a combination of leader and follower centered methods. Transformational Leadership seems to be a combination of path-goal, leader member exchange, and style approach. Transformational leadership depends on a leader’s ability to inspire his or her followers (Northouse 9: Transformational Leadership) It requires a connection, yet at the same time a knowledge of the task that needs to be completed. It depends on the emotions and values and ethics of the leader as well. Once more I appreciate the motivation and relationship aspect present in this style of leadership. But I do not think it is the best, because like path goal it can be hazardous if it is used in the wrong way. Famous dictators like Mussolini and Hitler followed this approach in part, because they knew their followers and the way to move them.

Genuine leadership on the other hand reinforces the idea that a good effective leader must be morally grounded and able to respond to people’s needs and values. It relies on ideas such as passion, behavior, connectedness, consistency, and compassion (Northouse 10: Authentic Leadership). A genuine, or authentic leader, must lead from the heart. The leader must be internally motivated to lead others. I feel that although it helps immensely for a leader to have this internal motivation stemming from their values, it is not so for a handful of situations. Sometimes effective leaders can go against their values to lead, or at least are willing to bend their values to achieve a task to avoid a punishment.

Leadership Identity seems to exist as a relative theory that combines self, cognitive ability, and others into one relationship. A leader has different phases he or she goes through (but usually do not complete). These end in self authorship (level 4) and self-transforming mind (level 5). This theory is perhaps the most open to different situations, as it does not get caught up in what makes a leader, but rather the process a leader may or may not go through. Awareness leads to exploration which leads to an identity, which then passes through cognition to reach a differentiating stage that leads to generalization and ends up at integration where the cycle may start over for a new situation. Each cycle the leader develops further. This method inherently recognizes the effect of people on the leader (and later the leader on them) while simultaneously recognizing the internal processing of the situation by the leader.

Throughout all of these theories, I have come to see leadership as an ever continuing process. It cannot be easily defined by neither its outcomes nor styles nor traits of followers or leaders. Rather, leadership is the process of completing valuable goals (completing a vision) by means of motivating a recognized group of other people by means of a situation-adjusted and capable leader. A leader is more effective when relationships are built (the level of the relationship depends on the situation), but does not necessarily have to yield power. A goal must be valuable because leadership without value is only manipulation. Context floods the definition, because leadership varies so much. A good leader must be able to know the followers, know the task, and adjust his or her style appropriately. The leader must be capable, meaning he or she must be able to have or know a way to obtain certain skills or knowledge. A truly authentic leader would not be able to be as flexible, thus making him or her not the best leader for a general situation.

Most of my leadership experience has been focused around service. In high school, I was in charge of actively recruiting other students and getting them to travel to the site on a regular weekly basis. Since community service at St. Xavier was not required, it was often difficult to encourage students to come each week, especially once exams approached. In this example, I was laid back with students up to a point. I reminded them to come, and if they did not have a ride I would arrange one for them. But if a student continued to be absent, I had to contact them outside of school and explain to them on a personal basis why their kid would miss them. Basically I had to form a relationship with each student I was in charge of. Some students did not require any further encouragement, but others did. Each student that volunteered signed up on his own will, so at first they were intrinsically motivation. Because service is such an important part of my life, I also had the motivation to get these students to the site and to give recommendations on how to better the programs.

I plan to enter the medical field as either a doctor or physician’s assistant. Both of these positions imply leadership capabilities. However in the medical field teamwork is also imperative. Leading in this sort of environment will also be very motivation oriented. Even failure to complete even the smallest of procedures can be detrimental to a patient. In these regards it will be necessary to keep motivation high, with the goal always being the wellbeing of the patient, which is the most valuable of goals. Patient relations will be extremely important as well. As a leader I will need to be strict on some things, but open to input and cooperation with specialists and the rest of a medical staff. The leading style will still depend on relationships, but will vary patient to patient. Some patients may have a large number of issues and require a lot of teamwork, whereas others not so much. Inevitably conflict will arise between staff members, and these issues will have to be worked out. The team must stay united to be effective. Fortunately, conflict resolution is one of my strengths as a leader.

As a leader I also have other skills. First and foremost I have relationship skills. I pride myself on being able to talk to a person and analyze them and discover some of their motivations. In this sense I have, according to the skills approach, high human skills. If pressed for time, I can change my traditionally laid-back style of leadership to a more task oriented leadership. I have some skills necessary to a leader, but lack others that would allow me to be an even more versatile leader. I am not very well organized and lack a high level of assertiveness. I am however able to settle conflicts or relate to individuals in order to settle disputes. I have a hard time determining other leadership skills I possess because simply I have not had enough experience with different contexts.

Simply because I am a Caucasian male, I am unfortunately put in a position where I generally would have more leadership positions. There are numerous statistics to prove this. Most notably, women and minorities think they are less capable leaders even if they have the skills to be a good leader (Dugan). From this psychological perspective, I am placed at an advantage. Of course, there are some positions where I am put at a disadvantage because race and gender minorities are preferred, but overall I am in a position of advantage due to existing stereotypes.

Leadership can directly relate to social responsibility. Leading *for* social responsibility can be defined as using leadership as a means to create a “better” world. I believe that each person is socially responsible for a number of things, placed in two broad categories: the welfare of other and the caring for the earth and its resources. The level of responsibility depends on a person’s life situation. We as college educated Americans hold a lot of power. As leaders in our daily lives and organizations, we must actively pursue causes relating to the welfare of others and the caring of the planet and its resources. If we ignore either one of these, we are not leading with social responsibility.

The course topics described various ways to lead. Some, like genuine leadership or motivational leadership, implied values. The class on ethics finally brought to the forefront issues that will inevitably face us as future leaders. Every week we discussed a leadership topic, but we did not focus on the business world. Rather, we formulated fictional situations in which we could apply each method to the real world. Social responsibility is our responsibility, and we can go about change through knowledge of our own leadership definitions.

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