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Leadership, Overview

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Introduction

Although leadership pervades almost every aspect of social life, it is usually associated with business administration, politics, and other institutions. Commonplace notions about leadership are widespread and tend to eclipse current scientific knowledge. Additionally, the market for popular books about leadership has exploded. However, research studies on leadership have never delivered more diverse and inconsistent results as the currently do. Regardless, scientific research in this area contributes to a lively discourse that views leadership from various angles and perspectives.

Definition

Leadership can be defined in two different ways: leadership as *trait* of a person or as *process* within a certain social setting (cf. Northouse, 2010, pp. 4–5). The trait viewpoint comprehends leaders as individuals with specific innate or inborn characteristics or qualities (like physical or personality factors) that make them leaders. The process view comes to terms with leadership in the context of social exchanges between leaders and followers. According to this perspective, leadership is a genuine relational phenomenon. It can be acquired by forthcoming leaders

and transformed in relation to the given social situation. In contrast, the trait view restricts leadership to talented aspirants and aims to separate skilled leaders from followers.

Within the frame of the trait view, leadership can be defined as the “ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members” (House, Hanges, Javidar, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, p. 15). By contrast, a definition that refers to the process view terms leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). Although both definitions use identical terms, they differ fundamentally in their chosen focus: person versus process, individual trait versus social interaction.

Keywords

Ideology; influence; great man theory; leadership metaphor; post-heroic leadership; ethical leadership

Traditional Debates

Leadership is a controversial issue. It is one of the most talked about topics in business and politics. However, definitions and conceptualizations of leadership are often riddled with unproven common presumptions and ideologies. Neuberger (2002, pp. 58–69) specified ideologies referring to leadership. Such ideologies are simplifying cognitions in order to legitimate certain viewpoints and practices connected with leadership. They immunize holders of ideologies against other sometimes critical notions and breed the sense of togetherness of all people sharing the ideology. Neuberger presents such ideologies of leadership as, “Leadership exists because humans want or have to be lead,” “Leadership is a necessary functional principle of success,” and “Leadership hierarchies represent the differences of human abilities and motivation.” None of these ideologies stands up to critical scrutiny. On closer

examination, they lack reasonable content. Nevertheless, numerous definitions and theories of leadership are infected by such ideological assumptions.

The main theories have treated leadership with reference to different viewpoints. According to numerous presentations in textbooks, there are four main divisions (e.g., Bryman, 1996): the trait approach, the behavioral approach, the contingency approach, and the New Leadership approach. During the twentieth century, these approaches have come one after another so that their temporal alignment represents the history of leadership theory and research in Western culture.

Trait Approach

The trait approach traces leadership and its effective results back to the personal properties of the leader itself. The core thesis says that the main aspect of the ability to lead is a widely stable personal disposition – unless it is an innate or acquired trait. This notion is based on the so-called “great man theory” that gained much attraction within leadership theories and research during the first half of the twentieth century. Accordingly, this approach was supported with reference to leading figures in politics and business. One of the most discussed terms within this heroic notion of leadership was charisma, and charismatic leadership was originally inspired by a superficial reception of Max Weber’s (1921) types of legitimate authority. In the twentieth century, the trait approach gradually began drawing criticism. The main points were that trait theories, by encouraging hero worship, would simplify leadership and fade out the social context.

Simultaneously, empirical research within this approach has never achieved truly satisfying results. Nevertheless, the trait approach is still pursued. The notion that success in politics and business is mainly rooted in personality traits is part of the individualism that dominates Western culture. In current research, the trait approach is updated by numerous studies where personality traits are correlated with criteria of effective leadership.

Behavioral Approach

Parallel to the behavioral shift in psychological research in the middle of the twentieth century, a change in viewing and conceptualizing leadership also occurred. This new approach that asks for significant behavior of leaders raises hopes of learning and change of leadership. Instead of traits, leadership styles gained increasing interest in research. The pioneering study with this view was carried out by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939). Their survey led to the groundbreaking and still-used distinction between autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles. Subsequently, scientists of the so-called Ohio studies established two primary types of leadership behavior that are part of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ): the initiation-of-structure factor, which emphasizes task-related behaviors of the leader, and the consideration factor, which focuses on the relationship between the leader and the followers (Yukl, 2010, p. 104).

Based on this approach, much research was done to support the behavioral perspective. But the results were rather inconsistent (Bryman, 1996, p. 278). Like the trait theories, the behavioral approach focuses mainly on the leader and its behavior. Insufficient attention was paid to the fact that the effects of leadership behavior are dependent on the given situational context.

Contingency Approach

Both of the approaches above narrow relevant variables of effective leadership to universally appropriate sets of personal traits or behavioral styles of leadership. At the beginning of the 1960s, scientific research tried to overcome this problem. Situational theories, or the so-called contingency approach, emerged. Its proponents pay additional attention to situational factors of leadership behavior. Three classes of variables are considered especially in studies that follow the contingency approach: (1) variables connected with personal and behavioral characteristics of the leader, (2) variables concerning the behavior of the followers, and (3) variables of the situation like features of the task (e.g., task difficulty) or attributes of the organization (e.g., organizational culture).

One of the best known models of this approach was established by Fiedler (1967). In experimental studies, he correlated the orientation of the leader (relationship or task) with selected elements of the situation (leader-member relations, task structure, and leader position power). Fiedler found that task-oriented leaders were more effective in low- and high-control situations, whereas relationship-oriented managers were more effective in moderate-control situations.

Vroom and Yetton (1973) developed a normative model of leadership. Along the junctions of a decision tree, a set of situational variables (e.g., the importance of the decision quality and acceptance, the amount of relevant information possessed by the leader and the followers, and the likelihood that the followers will accept an autocratic decision) is taken into account in order to determine efficient leadership behavior. Although contingency theories have found some empirical evidence, criticism has pointed out conceptual and methodical weaknesses and some barriers to practical implementation.

Interactional Approach

Since the 1980s, new perspectives on leadership have emerged. Although there are some difficulties in merging them into a homogenous approach, some characteristics of this sometimes called "new leadership approach" can be described. In relation to the situational theories that mainly treat situational conditions of effective leadership behavior, the new interactional concepts focus more on the relation between leader and followers. They try to examine how the quality and characteristics of the leader-follower relationship influence the productivity and the job satisfaction of the employees.

A prominent example is the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory that describes how leaders develop reciprocal and trustful exchange relationships with their followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The concept of transformational leadership has seen growing attention in leadership research. It can be understood as an extrapolation of the so-called transactional leadership, which conceptualizes

the interaction of the leader and the subordinates as an exchange relationship.

Similar to the LMX theory, the main task of an effective transactional leader is to set appropriate goals and attractive appeals. In return, the followers are ready to perform expected jobs. In contrast, transformational leadership aims to gain influence on the mindset and the attitudes of the followers. Transformational leaders try to enhance the intrinsic job motivation and the job identification of the employees. Bass and Avolio (1994) have distilled the following basic factors of effective transformational leadership: (1) idealized influence: charismatic vision that inspires others to follow; (2) inspirational motivation: motivating others to commit to the vision; (3) intellectual stimulation: encouraging innovation and creativity; and (4) individualized consideration: coaching to the specific needs of followers.

Critics object to theoretical and methodological weaknesses of this concept. Furthermore they point out that it bears high resemblance to the notion of charisma and the great man myth. It suffers from a "heroic leadership" bias (Yukl, 2010, p. 494). In sum, this would lead to a resurrection of the trait approach. On the other hand, the proponents of the transformational leadership style have argued for essential differences between the concepts of charisma and transformational leadership.

Critical Debates

Overcoming Heroic Leadership

Critical attitudes to leadership notions have already been emerged within the main stream of theoretical and empirical research. As outlined above, leadership theories tend to focus on the leader and its properties and run the risk of hero worship of leaders. This tendency, which explains the performance of groups and followers with reference to the assigned leader, was termed the "romance of leadership" (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985).

Several critical discourses of leadership aim to overcome this heroic view on leadership. The focal points of such critical debates are the

relationship between leaders and followers and the process of leadership as social interaction (Western, 2008). Additionally, leadership is considered as a social construction (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). According to that view, leadership is understood as a kind of symbolic action that involves processes of sense-making within certain organizational settings (Pye, 2005). Discourse analyses of leadership models (Fairhurst, 2007; Western, 2008) and in-depth studies of primary leadership metaphors (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) are used as methods in order to gain deeper insights in those discourses and practices that create a widely branched understanding of leadership within the medium of symbolic interaction.

Against this background, the idea of post-heroic leadership emerges. It is envisioned as a collaborative social process. Leaders are expected to create conditions under which collective learning and continuous improvement can occur (Fletcher, 2004). The concept of shared leadership also fits with this idea. Shared leadership is defined as a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by "serial emergence" of official as well as unofficial leaders (Pearce, 2004, p. 48). Thus, the source of leadership influence is distributed among team members rather than concentrated on a single individual. In such teams, the team members both lead and follow one another with reference to different fields of expertise.

Psychoanalytic Approach

From a psychoanalytical perspective, leadership has been analyzed for a long time. Freud (1922) explored leadership as a phenomenon of libidinous attraction. It occurs if the members of a group replace their ego ideal by a common outer object: the leader. As a consequence of this mainly unconscious process, all group members are strongly identified with the leader. Additionally, they are tightly emotionally bound to each other like a herd. They idealize the leader and they are ready to follow him/her as their collective super-ego without reserve.

Recent research within this area focuses on the deficient behavior of leaders as a result of

personality disorders. The narcissistic mode of leadership has seen much attraction and is used to reveal the characteristics of a specific type of contemporary leadership: a grandiose sense of self-importance and excessive fantasies of unlimited success associated with a high lack of emotions and empathy (Kets de Vries, 2006).

Gender and Leadership

Since the rise of women's liberation, a discourse on gender and leadership has emerged. This discourse was fed by the fact that, although an increasing number of women pursue academic education, most leading management positions in organizations are held by men. Research in this field mainly explores two issues: (1) the reason why women are underrepresented in upper echelons, and (2) the differences between male and female leadership styles. The first question raises the issue of the so-called glass ceiling effect. This metaphor refers to invisible barriers that prevent women (and minorities) from reaching the top positions in an organization. Everybody can see them but they are primarily occupied by men. In research, several types of such barriers are distinguished: societal barriers, business and performance barriers, family demands, role expectations, and psychological barriers like gender stereotypes (cf. Yukl, 2010, p. 467).

The last point is associated with the second question. The exploration of differences between male and female leadership styles is muddled by many presuppositions and prejudices. Although numerous studies have compared male and female leaders, there is no clear evidence of significant gender differences in leadership behavior or skills. Some studies found that women use slightly more participative and transformational leadership behavior, but in sum the results are mixed. Meta-analysis studies did not find overall crucial gender differences (cf. Yukl, 2010, p. 468). Moreover, the major problems of comparative studies in this area result from unconsidered meta-theoretical implications (e.g., essentialism vs. social constructionism), gender-confounded variables (e.g., role behavior), and disregarded contextual influences like organizational culture.

Nevertheless, in practice, the topic of gender and leadership currently is of great importance. Many organizations try to overcome gender imbalance in leading positions by implementing concepts and tools of diversity management.

Ethical Leadership

The construct of ethical leadership has emerged against the background of increasing moral and ethical scandals, mainly in business and government organizations. A definition can be given from both a normative (What should ethical leaders do?) and a descriptive perspective (How do leaders behave who are assigned as ethical?). In the first case, the question has to be considered in the area of business ethics. In the second case, ethical leadership has to be characterized with reference to other psychological notions like role models, norms, values, and personal integrity. This leads to the problem in which ethical leadership expands to a broad, inhomogeneous concept that can be related to many similar theories of leadership such as servant, spiritual, or authentic leadership (Yukl, 2010, p. 329). Research in this field relies on numerous correlation studies investigating antecedents and effects of ethical leadership. In practice, ethical leadership becomes more important. Although the term and the concept are quite vague, companies invest in educational programs in order to promote moral behavior in organizations and to enforce compliance with ethical guidelines and policies.

Leadership is one of the most relevant practical issues of our times. Although democratization in many fields of modern society proceeds, strong leaders rebound and often enjoy a good reputation. Trivial guidebooks concerning leadership are very popular. Traditional leaders succeed because people look for footing and guidance. However, in recent years, alternative approaches like shared leadership have become more important. Leadership then tends to be role that is adopted more or less successfully by a person due to certain requirements of a given social situation.

In the future, leadership will be one of the most prominent research topics within psychology. The most challenging missions are the following: (1) scientific research and practical consideration

should be coordinated; (2) the widely ramified current approaches should be combined into a bundle theory; and (3) critical thinking about leadership should be continued and still be included in psychological research without breeding any kind of demonizing leadership.

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Learning

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Introduction

It is easy to surmise that learning is omnipresent. Nowadays, not only is everyone learning but seemingly also everything: rats, dogs, and pigeons; organizations and systems; machines; regions; and societies. Although the primary focus of learning has been on children, learning is now also important to adults and elders. Our natural potentials for lifelong learning are now broadly accepted yet also been transformed into a burden. If we want to comply with the new neoliberal normality imposed on more and more of our lives, the modernization of learning seems to mean a generalization from opportunities for a few towards a life sentence for all.

Definition: The Problematic of Defining or “How Are We Approaching Learning?”

It is almost compulsory to start with a definition of the subject to be discussed. Conventionally, such a definition contributes a quick synopsis where the authors present their understanding of the subject

matter, thereby overlooking and, at the same time, obscuring the potentially problematic character of the definition itself. This common practice is misleading since the reader is left with a one-sided view of issues. The practice of offering a definition can constitute neglect and become a political ploy. Therefore, we should dispute the very idea of offering as a starting point an easy definition of learning. We must insist that this idea is misleading and favors hegemonic practices that support various trends, theories, and approaches that attempt to consolidate and impose particular perceptions (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). There are several omissions in such an authoritative approach:

- All important (wo)men who have not had the luck to be included in the chosen definition are excluded.
- The social practices in which and through which learning takes place and emerges are also excluded.
- All the subjects (i.e., persons) called to learn, together with their needs, opinions, experiences, and concepts about learning, are absent.

To define learning we might ask: What notion of knowledge is implicitly re/produced by the commonplace approach? What do we have to learn (or to teach) according to the authoritative model?

A linear, mechanical conceptualization of knowledge and learning is based on a series of structural seclusions between the subjects who are involved in the production, distribution, and usage of knowledge: producer (researcher) → transformer (professor) → vehicle (student) → user (pupil at school). This model implies a certain worldview of society, the subjects, their practices and relations, and their usage of knowledge in the social world. It supports and represents an approach we could call social engineering. Knowledge from this perspective is primarily formal and authoritative (if not authoritarian) because it includes what official and authoritative sources are expecting as outputs. Such knowledge is only waiting to be applied. If we accept this worldview about human beings, their practices, and relations in society, we proceed according to the given model without facing any theoretical or moral dilemmas.