The Leadership Dilema

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Introduction

Much of the literature on leadership suggests that not much has changed in the last 40 years regarding how leadership is regarded or the approach to leader development. For example, on the website of a predominant consulting firm that deals in programs for leadership development, the dominant theme of the programs consists of challenging one's "beliefs". Such statements indicate the program is all about mind games and trying to change one's personality. This is not a significant departure from what passed as leadership development in the 70s and 80s when the "styles" approach to leadership was popular and many leadership development programs consisted of unstructured group sessions where group members "processed" (discussed) what happened, what was felt, and why.

The model for leadership development that became the "styles" approach to leadership development was premised on the idea that we can "make" leaders with the proper development program. The idea that leaders were born to lead was no longer accepted as viable. As we have moved into the 21st century the question remains, Can leadership be learned? The quick answer is certainly. Leadership is nothing more than a set of behaviors and actions that one takes in executing the role of leader, and such things can be taught and learned. The critical question is can someone who is not a leader become a leader through training? We want to say yes because we kind of rebel at the idea that leaders are born to be leaders, that there is some kind of genetic trait that naturally makes someone a leader. The problem we find is that after four decades of leadership development programs that focused on the "styles" approached to leadership, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to point to any single leader and say that person would not be a leader without our intervention. The truth is that those who are leaders today have achieved that status without our intervention. Furthermore, those who lead today, lead in much the same manner as those in times past, in spite of all the leadership development training. The impact of leadership development training appears to have been minimal. This led University of Tennessee Professor Max Wortman to exclaim once that "we need a new technology of leadership."

A Conceptual Gap

The first clue to the problem can be found in the typical history of leadership thought found in any college textbook on management, organization behavior, or other similar subject. Close examination of the chronological development of leadership theories reveals a significant conceptual gap in theory development. Most accounts begin with "trait theory." In reality, trait theory was not a "theory" as we know it, a conceptual model developed and articulated by a specific individual. Trait theory was more of a generic term to describe the common beliefs of the entire period prior to the introduction of the styles approaches to leadership. What was important about trait theory, however, is that it was a theory of determination; a theory of how a person became a leader. Behind trait theory was the belief that one was born to lead. In other words, the traits were genetically determined. Let's understand the real issue here. Traits did not make someone a leader. Traits were only the outward manifestation of being born to lead. The traits made leading possible and probable. The driving motivation to identify the "traits" was so that leaders could be identified early so that the process of electing, appointing, promoting, or otherwise elevating a person to leadership could be more effective and avoid the frustration of elevating a person to leadership who could not lead. By identifying the potential leader early in their lives, they could be given training to make them better at what they were destined to become.

Even the military had their take on "trait theory" and tried to infuse in NCOs and officers the idea of "traits" of a leader. However, the traits spoken of by the military were more in the nature of character traits, such as integrity, fairness, and honesty, rather than genetic traits. Research on traits continued well into the sixties. However, beginning in the forties the popularity of trait theory began to wane significantly, as research tended to show a very weak link, at best, between traits and leadership. There is a question here that begs to be asked. That question is this. Were the right traits being studied?

While there was a mass exodus from the trait theory camp, one cannot completely discount the validity of trait theory. The evidence in natural animal societies and human history clearly indicates that leaders exhibited some traits in common. Take animal societies, for example. The one that becomes the leader is often the one that is able to defeat the current leader in battle and provide protection for the pack or society. So strength and size are traits that we can look to as precursors to being a leader in those societies in addition to some measure of aggressiveness. To some degree, we see the same thing in early human societies. We see this even in biblical accounts. Saul, was chosen as the first king of Israel because, among other things, he stood head and shoulders above the rest of the population (Bible, I Samuel 10: 23, 24). When David was preparing to go up against Goliath, King Saul offered David his body armor (Bible, I Samuel 17:38). This suggests that David was not a little boy but a strapping young man, close to the size of Saul himself. Other accounts of David indicate he had great physical power. Size is also an example of the weakness of trait theory. Human history also has evidence of strong leaders whose size was not impressive. Among those was Napoleon and Hitler. And, there are, certainly, many large-sized people in history that did not become a leader.

Perhaps the trait most common among leaders is an aggressive personality. Now the question becomes one of whether personality is genetic or a product of external development. The answer is probably both. We breed dogs for personality characteristics. Is it therefore such a stretch to believe that human personality has a genetic component? Those involved in behavioral genetics seem to agree that personality genes exist but that we are likely decades away from isolating such genes (Azar, 2002). They also seem to agree that it would not be a single gene controlling personality but a combination of many genes and that environment plays a role as well (Reiss, 1977).We can put a bunch of toddlers in a room and watch as one or two become the dominant player in the group. How much of that dominance is genetic and how much is conditioning? What we do know is that those with dominant personalities are the ones who seek out leadership roles and become class presidents, group leaders, and such.

By the 1940s, confidence in trait theory was waning as researchers failed to find a consistent link between traits and leadership. The search began in earnest to find new models to explain leadership. Research by Ohio State in 1945 and later by the University of Michigan in 1950, yielded some new models that held a lot of promise. Out of these seminal studies came the "styles" approach to leadership which many latched on to as being a way to "make" a leader. The styles approach formed the basis for many new models that dominate the literature to this day. Rensis Likert's System Four, McGregor's Theory X Theory Y, Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership, and Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid, are some of the more well known models coming out of this period.

The styles theories evolved out of the desire to replace the belief that leaders were <u>born</u> with a theory which shows that leaders can be <u>made</u>. While the styles theories were quite successful in achieving acceptance and dominance in the literature of management and leadership, a subtle shift in emphasis occurred. The emphasis shifted from that which makes a person a leader to that which makes a leader effective. Thus, rather than having a new theory of leader determination, we have, instead, theories of leadership practice.

A Confused Literature

Another problem one finds when reading the literature on leadership is that the literature often uses the words "leader" and "manager" interchangeably, giving the impression that the two roles are the same. Yet, some authors go to great lengths to state that manager and leader are different roles. A prime example is the fact that Blake and Mouton's (1978) *Managerial Grid* concept is often listed in management textbooks and organization behavior books as a theory of leadership. Blake and Mouton contributed to the confusion by renaming their concept as a *Leadership Grid* when they published it in a military journal (*The Military Review,* 1980). Hersey and Blanchard's concept was called *Situational Leadership* and published in their book titled Managing *Organizational Behavior* (1977).

House and Mitchell's Path-Goal Theory deals exclusively with supervisory or management behavior toward subordinates (in Johns, 1988), and Tannenbaum and Schmidt's Leadership Patterns speak of various decision making patterns used by "managers"(in Johns, 1988). So, is it leadership? or management? or the same thing? Many authors, such as Bennis and Nanus (1985) and Hersey and Blanchard (1977), make a clear distinction between management and leadership, at least verbally. Zaleznik (1977) goes as far as to say that managers and leaders are psychologically different. Despite the rhetoric of a few, the distinctions blur when reading the literature.

Definitions of leadership, commonly found in the literature, tend to be limiting as well as confusing. Typically, leadership is defined as "the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). This definition is, at the same time, too narrow and too broad. It is too narrow in that it limits leadership to acts intended to influence the behavior of others, and it limits the target of leadership to individuals or groups of individuals. Left out in this definition are acts of responsibility that may have no direct or apparent indirect influence on behavior. Omitted is the idea that followers could be non-personal entities such as industries, organizations, and countries. The definition is too broad in that it tends to include acts of those "behind the scenes" who have no direct contact or relationship with those they would "influence."

The definition further implies that leadership is a function of the act rather than the office. Common usage would define leadership simply as what one does as a leader. Influence, then, becomes an outcome rather than the essence or objective of leadership. One is not a leader because one influences others but rather one influences others because one is a leader. The narrow focus of the styles theories limit the usefulness of the theories in the development of leaders. They focus primarily on behaviors involved in the management and supervision of immediate subordinates and neglect the range of activities that rightfully fall under the umbrella of leadership but that have little to do with supervising. Another difficulty with the way the current technology of leadership is used is that many practitioners of leadership development programs tend to make a value judgment about which style is "good" and which style is "not good." Generally, an authoritarian style is not good and a more participative style is considered good. In reality, we can all probably recall authoritarian leaders that people loved and participative leaders that were not regarded so well. The bottom line is that the value judgments about authoritarian vs. participative are not beneficial and that best style to use is the one that works for you.

Most of us are likely to be familiar with the DISC Personal Profile System, formerly published by Carlson Learning Company and the Meyers-Briggs Personality Inventory. While both instruments are different, they yield similar results. They tell us the predominant manner in which we tend to relate to others. The important lesson to be gained when these instruments are used in training, according to their literature, is that we should accept what we are. The behavioral style that we use predominantly is our strength, not a weakness. It is a strength, because it has been proven to work for us. It is strength even though it may be labeled as Dominant or more authoritarian, rather than democratic or participative.

Massey (1979) suggests that our basic behavioral patterns are programmed into us by age 12 and that those patterns are not likely to change unless we experience a Significant Emotional Event (SEE). Corazon Aquino experienced a significant emotional event with the assassination of her husband that changed her from a meek housewife to an aggressive political activist.

All of this begs the question, "how does one become a leader?"

Having charisma certainly makes it easier to become a leader. Many people become leaders solely on their charisma. A good example of that is our President, Barrack Obama. He really did not have a solid resume to qualify as President of the United States of America. He had never been a CEO of a business. He was never a Governor of a state or Mayor of a major city, and his senatorial experience was minimal at best. He did, however, have charisma in abundance, and used that charisma to convince a majority of Americans that he was the one they should elect as their leader.

The problem with charisma as a vehicle to becoming a leader is that it is difficult to acquire charisma through training and learning. While I would hesitate to say that charisma has genetic origins, I would say that it is a function of personality, which develops over a lifetime of environmental influences. That said, it is probably safe to say that if charisma can be learned, it would take a much longer time frame than a two-week, or two-month, leadership development course.

Those who do not have natural charisma and try to imitate charisma, come across as being phony. It is unnatural for them and it shows. Those with natural charisma find that others will tend to gravitate to them in social and professional settings. Assertiveness and aggressiveness are other factors related to personality that are helpful in becoming a leader. Those in leadership roles tend to be assertive/aggressive types. They are movers and shakers. They often seek the roles in which they find themselves. They are not hesitant to make their viewpoints known. They might describe themselves, or be described, as a "Type A" personality. On the DISC behavioral styles inventory, they might score as a high D (dominant) type. On the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, they might score as a ENTP or INTJ. The point here is that assertiveness/aggressiveness seems to be a rather common trait among those who are leaders.

The important question is can assertiveness and aggressiveness be learned or acquired through training? The answer is yes, providing we can identify specific behaviors or behavioral patterns that would represent assertiveness and aggressiveness. The problem is that while a behavior can be learned, the use of that behavior effectively may require a degree of skill or finesse that may not be so easily acquired. One would want to be assertive/aggressive without coming across as pushy or as a bully. The purpose is to draw people to you and not drive them away.

Back to Basics

In order to develop a technology of leadership that works, we need to get back to the basics and have a clear definition of "leader" and "leadership," and then look at those who meet the definition of "leader" and try to understand the process of how they came to be in that role. Quite simply, a leader is one who leads. In its simplicity this definition has wide ranging implications regarding what <u>makes</u> a person a leader and the nature of leadership. Implied is that the essential ingredients which <u>make</u> one a leader is the presence of followers and some concept of where he or she is going and what it takes to get there. Without followers "leader" is just an empty title and without a place to go leading cannot occur. It is further implied that a leader is out front, blazing the trail, setting the pace, setting the standard and determining the direction of movement.

A leader is not necessarily a person but can also be an organization or a country. How often have you heard the United States described as the leader of the free world? Or heard a major airline described as a leader in the airline industry or heard that General Motors is a leader in the automotive industry? Such entities are leaders because they have followers, those who want to achieve the same successes that they have achieved and play "follow the leader." They achieved the role of leader in much the same way as individuals achieve the role of leader.

There is nothing in our definition of "leader" that says one must be an executive, a supervisor, a manager, or a boss in order to be a leader. In fact, we can see many examples of people who are leaders who do not hold those titles. Ralph Nader comes to mind, as well as Gloria Steinham, and Sarah Palin. The common thread is that leaders have followers.

The natural follow-on question is how does one become a leader? The simple answer is to attract followers. The styles theorists would have us believe that people follow based on the style of leadership. Unfortunately, this position presumes that those that follow have no other goals in life, other than to follow someone who is warm and friendly and has a participative style. In other words, the followers do not care where they are going as long as the style is good.

The more fundamental reason people follow is because of a need to be led. People have goals and ambitions and strive to better their lives and position in life. They will follow the one who they believe can help them get to where they want to go. The style is immaterial. A brief example can illustrate. Let's say a group of people are on a small airplane that crash lands in a very remote and rugged wilderness with extremes of temperature and other climate conditions. Everyone survives the crash with minimum injury. Now the need is to survive the elements and find a way back to civilization and rescue. Among the group is a person who is an expert in woodcraft and survival skills and land navigation. Unfortunately, he is a very cranky person with a sour personality. Also is a college professor, who has never been camping, but has a very pleasing personality and a participative style of leading and managing. Who would the group most likely follows and depend on to help them survive the elements and get to safety? The most likely choice would be the person with the sour personality but the skills needed to get of the situation. Again, the style of leading is immaterial. It is the perceived ability to help the followers get where they want and need to go that is important in choosing the leader.

Back to the original question, how does one attract followers? It can be expressed in a three step process. First is to know where the potential followers want and need to go, personally and professionally. Secondly, have or develop the knowledge and skills needed to help them get where they want to go. And, third, let them know that you are willing and able to help them get where they want and need to go, both professionally and personally.

The political process of getting elected to office is a classic example of this process in action. Candidates for public office, believing they have the knowledge and skills to successfully hold public office, study the voters to determine what they want and need. Based on this, they begin a campaign to communicate to the constituents that they are better able to meet their needs than the other candidates. The one most successful in communicating that message gets elected.

Seeking a promotion is another example of the process in action. After being on the job awhile, one develops sufficient technical knowledge of operations to supervise others. Desiring promotion, the person seeks every opportunity to communicate to superiors that he or she is ready to move up and take on more responsibility. If successful, the promotion is granted. But who are the followers here? Chester Barnard (in Dunnette, 1965) said that leadership is bestowed by the followers. Since the bestowing was done by the superiors, it would be the superiors that are the followers. In essence they are saying, we need someone to lead the organization in this area and trust you to do that. To the subordinates, the person is only a supervisor or manager at the time of the appointment, not a leader of them. That must be earned separately.

Converting subordinates into followers would require the same three step process. Perhaps the best book I have read on leading subordinates is Blanchard and Bowles (1998) book *Gung Ho!*

Implications for Leadership Development

This three-step process for attracting followers can be successfully used in the full range of leader-follower relationships and is not limited to individual leadership but to organizations as well. Can we use this process to develop a technology of leadership that will "make" leaders? Not likely if there is not the seed of a leader already established. But, we can make the process of getting their work more efficiently.

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