

Leadership Theories and Style: A Transitional Approach

MAJ Earl Russell
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The study of leadership has been an important and central part of the literature on management and organization behavior for several decades. Leadership is a topic of interest, study and debate in almost every professional community worldwide. Organizations are constantly trying to understand how to effectively develop leaders for long term success within their organizations. The systemic problem with this endeavor is that there are many different leadership theories and styles. These options make it virtually impossible for professionals to agree concerning which one theory and or style can best help organizations to develop great leaders. Indeed, “no other role in organizations has received more interest than that of the leader” (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000,p. 177).

This project serves as a short overview of prominent leadership theories and styles that serve as the centerpiece for multiple studies, books and journals. Additionally, I propose that Transitional Leadership become a new leadership theory and style for introduction into the professional realm. Because of the number of leadership theories and styles included in this work, each will be discussed very briefly.

Leadership Theories

The Great Man Theory

The Great Man Theory hypothesizes that true leaders are born not made. Leaders have an inherent capacity to rise to the occasion when needed either through charisma, intelligence, wisdom or some other parameter. The theory was given prominence by a Scottish writer named Thomas Carlyle in the 1840’s. He felt that heroes used their personal attributes or divine intervention to shape history. His most famous quote “The

history of the world is but the biography of great men”, reflected his belief concerning leaders being born not made (Carlyle, 1888).

The Great Man Theory was popular with professional historians in the 1900’s. The term Great Man was used in this era because of the association of the male to leadership roles. The mythology behind some of the World’s great leaders helped support the thought that great leaders are born not made. After all, leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Julius Caesar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Alexander the Great could not have been taught to lead in the way that they did. As research and study of personalities and behavior progressed this theoretical thought fell out of favor with historians after World War II.

Trait Theories

Trait Theories can be described as a branch of the Great Man Theory. These theories hypothesize that the specific traits of an individual give them better propensity to be a leader. These personality traits or behavioral characteristics are inherent in the family and passed on genetically. This theory emphasizes that leaders share many common traits and characteristics that make them successful. These leadership traits are innate and instinctive qualities that you either have or you don’t.

Gordon Allport was an early advocate for trait theory and the study of traits. Allport and scholars after him identify physiological, demographic, intellective, task-related and social characteristics with leader effectiveness. Professionals have moved on from this way of thinking and focus more on what we can do as individuals to develop leadership qualities within ourselves and others.

Contingency Theories

The Contingency Theories hypothesize that no leadership style is correct as a stand alone. The leadership style used is contingent on factors such as the situation, quality of the followers or a number of other variables. In this theory there is no one right way to lead because the internal and external factors of the environment require the leader to adapt to that particular situation. This could never be more prevalent in a situation where a leader is very successful in a given organization but when moved to a different organization the leader is a failure. The leader didn't change, the environment, dynamics and personnel within the organization did.

In a general sense, contingency theories are a class of behavioral theory that contends there is no one best way of organizing / leading and that an organizational / leadership style that is effective in some situations may not be successful in others (Fiedler, 1967).

Situational Theories

Situational Theories are very similar to Contingency Theories in that the theories hypothesize that no single best type of leadership style exists. Effective leadership is determined by the leader, the group being led and the tasks that are required to be completed. Situational Leadership Theory includes four different leadership styles: telling, selling, participating and delegating.

The telling style requires the leader to direct what subordinates are to do. The selling style has the leader selling the idea to subordinate while giving them independence and autonomy to complete the task. The participating style has the leader interacting with everyone about his ideas while he listens to feedback. The delegating

style has the leader fully delegating tasks to subordinates and allowing them to work autonomously.

Behavioral Theories

In direct contrast to the Great Man Theory, Behavioral Theories hypothesize that great leaders are made, not born. This theory focuses on the actions of leaders not on personalities or characteristics they possess. The belief is that the leader can become an effective leader through observation, teaching and experience. This theory focuses on how leaders behave in given situations with the thought that the leaders can be conditioned to respond appropriately when confronted with various situations.

Theorists such as B.F. Skinner, John Watson and Kurt Lewin have been associated with behavioral theory. Lewin (1935) argued that there were three types of leaders: autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire. The autocratic leader makes decisions without consulting subordinates. The democratic leader consults his subordinates then makes his decision (with or without using their input). The laissez-faire leader lets subordinates make the decision and therefore takes no real leadership role other than assuming the position. Lewin believed that all leaders could fit into one of these three categories.

Participative Theories

Participative Theories hypothesize that the best leaders take into account what others have as input. This type of leadership helps to give a sense of ownership to the subordinates with the intent to garner active collaborative participation within the organization. By allowing subordinates to be involved increases their knowledge of the workings within the organization and helps them to understand the intricacies involved in

the decision making process by the leader. Using this type of leadership when developing organizational policy that directly affects subordinates will often result in active participation.

Within this theory the leader still retains the right to allow or not allow input of subordinates. The level of participation required or requested may depend on the type of decision being made. This type of leadership can lead to negative consequences if the leader often asks for opinions then ignores the subordinates input.

Management Theories

Management Theories (also known as Transactional Theories) hypothesize that optimal performance can be achieved through the use of awards and punishments. These theories are often used in management where employees are rewarded (bonuses, time off, etc.) when they optimally perform and are punished (reprimanded, shift work, etc.) when their performance is severely below expectations. These theories focus on controlling (micromanaging), short term planning, immediate task accomplishment and being organized.

This type of leadership was first introduced by Max Weber in 1947 then expounded upon by Bernard Bass in 1985. The exchange between leader and subordinate involves four dimensions: contingent rewards, active management by exception, passive management by exception and laissez-fair. The use of contingent rewards has the leaders linking the goal to rewards while clarifying expectations. Leaders set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely) goals for the subordinates. During active management by exception the leader monitors subordinates to ensure adherence to rules and policy. During passive management by exception the leader intervenes only when

standards are not achieved. The laissez-faire leader delegates responsibility and makes no decisions (as was discussed with behavioral theorists). Transactional leadership theory is by far the most pervasive theory used by leaders in professional organizations.

Relationship Theories

Relationship Theories (Transformational Theories) hypothesize that leadership should create positive change in subordinates by taking care of them thus enhancing motivation and performance of subordinates. This theory focuses on the connections made between leaders and subordinates. Leaders should motivate and inspire subordinates by helping them to understand the importance of the task or goals trying to be achieved. Leaders within this theoretical model usually have high ethical and moral standards and strive to ensure organizational, group and individual success.

James MacGrogor Burns first introduced transformational leadership theory in 1978. He made a conscious effort to point out the differences between transactional and transformational leadership theory. While he sees this type of leadership as being connected to a higher order of values and thinking, Bass in contrast sees it as amoral attributing it to dysfunctional or toxic leaders at best. This leadership theory, more than any other, incorporates multiple leadership theories such as behavior, charismatic, situational and transactional.

Leadership Styles

Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership is the most extreme form of transactional leadership. Leaders have absolute control and do not allow subordinates to provide input. In some cases this type of leadership can take the form of a dictatorship. Toxic leaders are

prevalent with this style leading to high staff turnover and limited organizational accomplishment. However, this type of leadership can be effective when unskilled labor is used or in high stress situations requiring immediate actions as long as the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Bureaucratic Leadership

Bureaucratic leadership is characterized by leaders that follow the rules precisely and use positional power to influence results. Bureaucratic leaders are also transactional as they impose strict discipline on subordinates and promotions are based on conformity to rules and performance results. Subordinates are expected to follow orders of the leader because of the authority that resides with his position. This type of leader is beneficial in hazardous types of jobs where safety is paramount and standards are expected to be followed exactly to ensure accuracy.

Charismatic Leadership

This type of leader is present within the transformational theory as discussed earlier but is still a distinctly different type of leader. This leader exudes enthusiasm within his subordinates in an effort to inspire them to achieve desired results. The charismatic leader commands the room and works diligently to empower subordinates individually. He pays attention to the surroundings to understand how he must act in order to maintain the focus of the group. He is theatrical in nature and persuasive through use of voice and body language.

Subordinate success tends to hinge on the leader in a charismatic leadership environment therefore when the leader is not present, performance may lag. Charismatic leaders often are more concerned about their self interests and if this becomes apparent to

the subordinates it can often lead to resentment and disaster for the organization.

Additionally, Charismatic leaders can sometimes become self absorbed when over confident leading to disastrous results. Naturally charismatic leaders are fortunate as this trait is one that is very difficult to learn.

Democratic/Participative Leadership

Democratic or Participative leadership is exemplified by the leader encouraging subordinate participation to contribute to the decision making process. This motivates subordinates to work harder as it gives them a sense of belonging and ownership. The leader still makes the final decisions but everyone gets involved in brainstorming and discussion. This type of leadership works exceptionally well when the focus is quality and not quantity or speed. Communication is the key for this type of leadership to work. Subordinates must be able to communicate their ideas or opinions effectively so that the leader fully understands their position if the leader is going to use the subordinate input to help complete the task. Additionally, to make this type of leadership effective the subordinates must have a working knowledge concerning the intricacies of the organization. Without this knowledge the subordinate cannot provide informative input or make relevant suggestions.

Laissez-faire Leadership

The Laissez-faire leader delegates all responsibility for decision making to subordinates. He provides the subordinates with guidance and materials then lets the subordinates develop courses of action and eventually make the decisions. He monitors work and answers questions of subordinates. This type of leadership can be very effective if the subordinates are knowledgeable and experienced. Those experienced subordinates

often aspire to be leaders therefore accept the responsibility. Laissez-faire leadership in general results in the lowest productivity among leadership styles.

Task-oriented Leadership

Task-oriented leaders can be very autocratic as their primary focus is to get the most immediate task completed. The leader is concerned only with task accomplishment therefore the team suffers through lack of motivation and retention. This type of leader sets clear goals, directs employees, is organized and plans well then expects standards to be adhered to and tasks accomplished at all cost.

People-oriented or Relations-oriented Leadership

People-oriented or Relations-oriented leadership is the opposite of task-oriented leadership. Leaders are completely motivated to concentrate on supporting and developing their subordinates. Not only does the leader develop relationships with the subordinates, he encourages subordinates to develop relationships among one another. The emphasis on dignity, respect and camaraderie will help develop trust and instill a focus on team performance. The leader provides a more supportive role in this atmosphere though he remains in control of the organization.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is recognized in many ways as a form of democratic leadership. The servant leader meets the needs of the team (subordinates). The entire team is involved in the decision making process. This type of leader looks to the people with whom he works and decides how he can contribute to their well-being. His main focus is on the people because only motivated subordinates will ensure optimum performance.

Servant leadership was first coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970's and has been supported by many leadership professionals. Though he never clearly defined servant leadership, he stated the following in his essay *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 2011): "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature."

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership in both professional business and educational settings refer to the use of an authoritative leader setting specific parameters, guidelines, rules and expectations then rewarding those that follow them and reach predetermined goals and objectives while punishing those that fail to do so. Transactional leaders focus on the job with production being more important than treatment of employees.

Zagorsek, Dimovsky & Skerlavaj (2008) give three reasons transactional leadership enables followers to perceive the consistency in leadership behavior as well as the reliability of their leaders. The leader secures agreements on the requirements of the job and rewards others in exchange for satisfactorily carrying out the assignment. The workers can rely on their leaders honoring their efforts through instrumental support or assistance in conflict resolution with superiors. From the perspective of followers, the consistent honoring of transactional agreements builds trust, dependability, and

perceptions of consistency with regard to leaders, each of which form a basis for effective group performance (Avolio/Bass, 1991).

Transformational Leadership

According to Bass (1985), transformational leadership can be defined as increasing the interest of the staff to achieve higher performance and developing and revealing the commitment and beliefs in the organization (Sahin, 2004). Transformational leadership theories grew from Burns's (1978) work in political leadership where he described the transforming leader as one who is able to lift followers up from their petty preoccupations and rally around a common purpose to achieve things never thought possible (Barbuto, 2005). The transformational leader focuses on taking care of the employee supporting the assumption that if the employee is treated well, feels of value to the organization and feels to be a part of the team then he or she will be more likely to produce desired results.

Leaders must invoke positive change within the organizations they lead whether in the military or as a civilian. Leaders, who intellectually stimulate workers, encourage creativity and workers accept challenges as part of their job (Sarros and Santora, 2001). Just as Pedraja-Rejas, Rodriguez-Ponce, et. al (2006) discovered that transformational leadership positively impacts small companies, Zagorsek, Dimovski and Skerlavai (2009) found that transformational leadership has a profound positive effect on the organizational learning process.

Transitional Leadership

Just as Robert K. Greenleaf coined the phrase Servant Leadership in 1970 and Raphael Lemkin coined the term Genocide in 1945, I propose to enter a new theoretical

leadership theory and terminology into the leadership professional domain. Transitional Leadership (in my view) should encompass every parameter known concerning leadership theory and style. It is understood that many theoretical perspectives such as transactional leadership already encompass multiple theoretical underpinnings from various leadership theories but more must be done. This new leadership theory embodies the thought that a leader can transition from one theoretical thought or one leadership style to another as the situation dictates.

Transitional leadership must include all leadership theories (with the exception of the denounced Great Man Theory) and all leadership styles. As a profession it is understood that leaders are made not born so every effort should be made to collectively make our leaders the best that they can be. Professional leaders should not argue over which theory or leadership style is best. Several theories (contingent, situational and transformational) already suggest that the best leaders adapt and utilize multiple theoretical perspectives depending on the situation so why not take it to the next level and teach leaders to utilize all aspects of leadership.

To incorporate this theoretical thought and application, the leadership profession will have to make drastic changes to the way leaders are trained. In a B.F. Skinner type manner leaders must be conditioned to respond and lead differently based on various situations. Leaders must first fully understand all leadership theories and styles and then be educated concerning which theoretical perspective and style to incorporate during given situations. Of course the process is not going to be perfect nor will it work flawlessly all the time but correlations can be made and learned by leaders through

practice. This can be accomplished through scenario, role play, small group session or individual training.

This is not an insurmountable task. Some of the theories already encompass multiple leadership styles such as behavioral theories including autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire leaders. The challenge for the leader is to get individuals to forget biases they may have toward a specific theory or style and be open minded to understanding how that theory or style may be used to benefit them as a leader in a given situation. If the Transitional Leadership concept is accepted as the universal theory and style to be taught across all professional disciplines the leaders that are developed would have the propensity to succeed no matter what type of organization they are placed in. The same effect would occur as would the use of a universal language amongst a group of people.

It is high time for the profession to stop being decentralized and centralize our thoughts, processes and training so that the optimal leadership theory and style can be implemented at every leadership level. As in the past some leaders will adapt to the intricacies of this theory better than others. Many leaders are already ahead of their peers as they exhibit multiple leadership styles and theoretical thought processes. It will take work and only those that really want to maximize their potential will put for the effort.

Conclusion

The leadership profession currently operates as a decentralized organization with multiple theories and styles being prevalent. A centralized theoretical construct coupled with a sound methodology for training needs to encompass all current theories and styles (except the Great Man Theory) in an effort to optimize opportunities for leadership

success. The Transitional Leadership construct has the viability to be that centralized theoretical foundation for the profession.

It is understood that this is a process that will have to garner widespread support throughout the leadership community before being considered as a viable new leadership theory. Additionally, it is understood that a significant amount of research, dialogue, writing and communication needs to be conducted in order to get the parameters of the theory correct. This paper serves as a very general overview of the major leadership theories and styles as well as a short introduction to the proposed Transitional Leadership Theory.

A further study should be conducted to publish a full explanation of the current interrelationships between the current theories and styles to include some type of link analysis spreadsheet or diagram. Such a study would help clarify what links between theories and styles are already prevalent in the leadership domain which would in turn help identify what still needs to be done to meld all of the theories and styles into one construct.

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