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Leadership: Past, Present, and Future: An Evolution of an Idea

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ABSTRACT

Defining a leader and the qualities that demonstrate leadership have evolved over the past centuries. Researchers have explored leadership traits using various methodologies since the concept of the leader and leadership has arisen in the lexicon. However, a consistent methodology or even consensus of the nature of effective leadership has been the subject of great debate. Understanding the ideals of leadership that help identify great leaders requires a reexamination of the historical evolution of leadership theories and principles. The early ideas of leadership were born of an age of expansion and industrial revolution that identified a leader as that one, great individual. Through this tour of history, the theories surrounding leaders and leadership have evolved and changed with each era. Trait theory and behavioral models have given way to ideals such as authentic leadership and environmental influenced leadership. More modern theories invert the traditional paradigm of vertical leadership to a flattened form of dynamic leadership where leaders are interchangeable dependent upon the task. While the intricacies of each theory cannot be completely and exhaustively examined in this text, the review and evolution of leadership principals is important in providing a framework to a better understanding as to the evolution of leadership theory from the early to modern age.

Keywords: Group Dynamics, Leader, Leadership, Management Theory, Organizational Behavior.

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1. Introduction

Who is a leader? What is leadership? These questions have perplexed researchers, corporate boards, school systems, the military, and every other organization since the nineteenth century when research began into this area. If one hundred people were surveyed, there would be one hundred different responses as to the definition of a leader and the qualities of a leader. In actuality, there are over two hundred differing ideas and theories on leadership and how to define this concept (McCleskey, 2014). The idea of leadership began with an exploration of specific individuals considered to be heroic such as Caesar, Napoleon, Nelson, Mao Zedong and others who led individually (Bennett & Murakami, 2016). A review of the research surrounding leadership is one of shifting dimensions, definitions,

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quantitative models, and qualitative models. In today's society, the concept of one singular leader for all is no longer feasible. The evolution of best research practices has relegated early leadership theories to the past (Udo-Akang, 2012). Current research seeks to understand the skills, characteristics, traits and situations in which leadership can effectively exist to lead and inspire an organization (Green, 2014). Contemporary research into leadership is replete with theories such as transformational, servant, authentic, shared, ethical and additional too numerous to name (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). An interesting field of leadership study is the application of Darwinian principles to leadership (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). However, a universally accepted concept of leadership remains elusive as the understanding of leadership continues to evolve. There exists no consistent methodology or description of universal leadership characteristics. Leadership theories have historical roots and are dependent on the theories' place in the historical timeline (Middlehurst, 2008). In this document, there is no attempt to provide a universal answer to the question of leadership. Rather, the evolution of the study of leadership from the late nineteenth century to the present and beyond is important to understanding the present state of leadership studies and the various methodologies for identifying effective leadership. The researchers will journey through history of leadership from the age of the Second Industrial Revolution to the present day. Lastly, the investigators will peer into the future direction of research in this elusive realm known as leadership.

2. Methodology

Numerous databases were utilized conducting this literature review. Searches were conducted utilizing common terms such as leadership, theories of leadership, management theory, group dynamics organizational behavior and other related terms. The articles were subject to peer review, current and historical since historical theories were subjected to review, uniqueness as related to contemporary theories and analysis of works containing both quantitative and qualitative data.

2.1 Defining a leader and leadership

It appears that dialogues regarding leaders turn up in virtually every facet of society. Arguments ensue as to whether someone is a leader and what traits make the individual a leader. Some suggest a leader is born to lead. Others suggest a leader becomes one through experience. Still others suggest that there is no such thing as a leader, and a leader is the perpetuation of a fiction. Merriam-Webster defined a leader as "one that leads" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). The principle of leadership is defined as "a position at the front" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). The definitions of leader and leadership are hardly enlightening.

Definitions of what constitutes a leader have been offered that are more in depth than a standard dictionary. A leader has been viewed as any relevant influence made upon an organization (Johns & Moser, 1989). The word leader has existed in our lexicon since the fourteenth century (King, 1990). Another definition of a leader is one that exerts influence upon his subordinates to achieve stated goals (Johns & Moser, 1989). The earliest example of a leader can be traced back to ancient times. A leader was involved in hunting or warfare as was common in the earliest of human history (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). A leader in this scenario would lead his group at the front line to accomplish their task whether it be hunting or defending the group from neighboring groups or tribes (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Today, leaders, such as our President, do not sit at the front lines of a battle with his troops (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Rather, he coordinates and implements his actions of leadership in the comfort of Washington D.C. The last time a sitting President personally led troops into battle was President Washington during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 (Staff, 2017).

If the term leader is difficult to define, then leadership is even more difficult. The idea that there was such a thing as leadership did not enter our daily life until the late eighteenth century (King, 1990). In his discussion of the origin of leadership, King remarked that leadership is frequently discussed but not understood (King, 1990). Many leadership theories focus less on studying leadership as a behavior and more as a set of actions on the part of the leader (Johns & Moser, 1989). Furthermore, differing theoretical ideas of leadership have arisen at various times in history. These ideals of leadership and research into the area of leadership are a product of the era in which they germinate (Middlehurst, 2008). More recent research regarding evolutionary theories and the integration of Darwinian ideas suggested

that actions of leadership and traits of leadership are directly tied to our evolution as a species (Ronay & Vugt, 2014).

2.2 Leadership from a historical perspective

If presupposition is utilized where differing ideals of leadership are at least in part a product of their time, then one needs parameters defined within the context of the time in which these theories arose. King viewed evolution as a set of ideals that continually evolved without reference to historical periods (King, 1990). While an appropriate and interesting approach, a historical timeframe must, at the very least be acknowledged. We are a product, in some fashion, of the time and place in which we exist. Northouse also proposed a view from a year to year approach utilizing a different time frame (Northouse, 2015).

3. Second industrial revolution

3.1 Great man

The nascent field of leadership study began with what has been coined as the “Great Man Theory” (Malakyan, 2014). This theory presupposes that leaders are born to lead (Malakyan, 2014). According to early adherents of this theory, certain men (women at the time were not part of the research due to the pervasive gender discrimination and views of the time) were born with innate characteristics that destined them to lead (Johns & Moser, 1989). Researchers examined ancient and past leaders such as Napoleon, Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, and others (King, 1990). Their leadership assumed a certain born ability to lead (Johns & Moser, 1989). Individuals were counseled that to be a leader, one needs to emulate the historically great leaders of our ancient past (King, 1990). Obviously, this theory had several problems, not the least of which is any empirical data to prove the validity of the Great Man. Further, a certain bias inherently exists. Who decides out of the sum of human history who is a great leader, and who is not a great leader? Interestingly enough, one can still find the “Art of War” by Sun Tzu on bookshelves.

3.2 Trait

Trait theory was born out of the early Great Man theory. Trait theory was an extension of the Great Man theory in an attempt to provide an early framework for leadership study (Malakyan, 2014). Trait theorists surmised that certain qualities were needed, such as: high energy, integrity, competence of their area of expertise, intelligence, and faith, among others (Johns & Moser, 1989). Trait theory was written in generalities of traits that were viewed to be common with great leaders. Like the Great Man theory, the trait model allowed for no room for an individual to have any hope of becoming a leader. One was either born a leader or they were not (Malakyan, 2014). The trait approach failed for the same reasons as did its father theory, the Great Man. There was simply no empirically viable evidence to support the theory (Johns & Moser, 1989). These early theories were not situational. They existed in a vacuum and did not account for the situation or circumstances in which leaders found themselves. These theories suggest that leaders are pre-determined.

4. Interregnum period

There is no finite line to define when one period of leadership theory ends and where another begins. In the dark recesses of academia, there are still probably individuals pining for the simplistic view of the Great Man. As a society, we sometimes ascribe this theory to certain leaders especially in times of great conflict and turmoil. Research evolves even in leadership. The idea of power and persuasion are no different (King, 1990). With the failings of the Great Man and Trait Theory acknowledged, researches turned to the study of power. The focus of this area was on the amount of power acquired by a leader and the way the power was utilized to influence or otherwise persuade those subordinated to him (King, 1990). This theory failed for the same reason as all other prior theories. Though the power theory ignores the leader’s personality, there is a lack of empirical data to allow for justification of this theory (Johns & Moser, 1989).

Modern research acknowledges that there is about a limit of 150 subordinates that can be led utilizing a theory such as the Great Man or power theories (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Beyond this number, leaders would resort to the use of coercion to maintain control, which is not acceptable in our culture (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). This theory was proposed during the years surrounding World War II. The cataclysmic events and seismic shifts in the world order cannot be disregarded in the development of this theory. People searched for strong leaders and found them in the likes of Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, Mao, and others.

5. Post-war years until the 1980s

A survey of research during this extended period saw an explosion of new theories. The development of any leadership theory can be said to be dependent on the context, both historical and cultural, in which they develop (Middlehurst, 2008). The rapid growth of the United States following World War II and the country's presence both commercially and culturally cannot be ignored. This period saw the rise of national and multi-national corporations employing thousands of employees. The cult of personality that was promoted under the Great Man and other earlier theories could simply not support an adequate understanding of leadership.

5.1 Behavior

The behavior theorists of leadership examined the actions of the leader as opposed to their personality traits (King, 1990). The initial view of behavior theory is that while the leader focused on accomplishing the task, he or she had concern and an understanding of group cohesiveness as well as the individual members of the group (King, 1990). Studies in this early time of behavior research focused on a factor analytic procedure for conducting research (Johns & Moser, 1989). This theory evolved into the well-known Theory X and Theory Y views of leadership. Theory X presupposed that 1) Individuals disliked their work; 2) They needed to be controlled or else they would not work; and 3) Most, if not all people wanted job security as opposed to responsibility (Northouse, 2015). Theory Y was in direct opposition to Theory X (King, 1990). Theory Y proposed that 1) Individuals generally liked their work; 2) Individuals are self-motivated and do not require any coercion; and 3) Individuals crave responsibility and will readily accept it (Northouse, 2015). A large amount of research was conducted regarding behavior theory. The results of such studies were not always consistent with these theories. (King, 1990).

The behavior studies of leadership were a step forward in distancing researchers away from the unsupported earlier theories. There was copious amounts of data and studies in behavior. Unfortunately, there were still elements that were not considered. First and foremost, these studies of leadership existed in a vacuum where there was no consideration for subordinates and their role (Malakyan, 2014). Furthermore, the behavior studies ignored the situation and environment of the leader.

5.2 Situation and contingency

To recognize the role the environment played in the leader-subordinate dynamic, the situational theory was added to the mix. There was finally recognition that certain environmental factors must be taken into consideration (King, 1990). For example, the task itself as well as social status of all parties and nature of the working environment were all considerations in the research (Bass, 1960). This theory recognized the possibility that the leader mattered less than the environment in which the leader-subordinate dynamic occurred (King, 1990). Leadership was becoming separated from the individual as a leader. Leadership was more a function or process by which the larger organization could accomplish its goals (Middlehurst, 2008). There was also a branch of this situational approach to address the social status of the leader and the subordinates (King, 1990). There was finally provable recognition that a leader had to adapt to the situation in which he or she found themselves (Johns & Moser, 1989). The ability to adapt resulted in more successful leaders (Johns & Moser, 1989).

The acknowledgement of adaptability as a trait led to a renaissance in the view of leadership. This area of study has been termed contingency (King, 1990). Successful leadership was viewed as hinging on factors such as personality, behavior, influence and the situational environment (King, 1990). Leadership under a contingency approach is fluid and ever changing to the situation (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). The style of leadership was given great importance. (Malakyan, 2014).

Path-Goal leadership is an offshoot of the contingency approach (King, 1990). The roles of leader and subordinate remain strictly delineated with the leader directing and the subordinate following (Malakyan, 2014). Under a path-goal model, the leader directs the subordinates in accomplishing the goals of the organization while working with subordinates to overcome obstacles to achieve that goal (Northouse, 2015). The normative approach was another offshoot of the contingency theory. Under this approach, a leader was viewed as most effective when he or she performed a differentiated diagnosis of the situation to determine the best course of action (King, 1990).

6. Leadership in the modern era

Having journeyed through the development of leadership theories from the 19th century into the 20th century, it should be noted here that some theories have not been completely addressed herein. However, they are no less important. An integral theme of all leadership theories from the past into a majority of the present day is that they are focused squarely on the leader and the qualities that give rise to leadership. Each theory has its place in this study of leadership. No one theory can address all the concerns regarding leadership. The modern era though is a step in that direction. The modern era can be best characterized as an early transition from the prior period to a more inclusive and flattened group structure.

6.1 Transformation

The theory of transformational leadership is the method by which leaders and followers mutually help each other to increase motivation and ethical behavior (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Within this theory, the burden of leadership rests upon all individuals in the group working towards a common goal (King, 1990). Change and adaptability are the hallmarks of transformative leadership (Johns & Moser, 1989).

Some researchers argue that effective transformative leadership requires charismatic leadership (King, 1990). Leaders must create a vision within this construct, and this vision needs to be conveyed by hopefully a charismatic leader who can inspire others (King, 1990). Charismatic leaders are viewed by Vugt as the exception rather than the rule in today's society (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Furthermore, charismatic leadership creates an issue with up and coming theories. Under a more follower focused view of leadership, charisma requires followers to adapt to the leader rather than giving importance to the followers (Malakyan, 2014).

6.2 Authentic leadership

Appropriately named, authentic leadership focusses on the authenticity of the person in charge as well as their actual leadership (Northouse, 2015). Still in the early phases of development, this leadership style has many accepted definitions concentrating on the diverse aspects it embodies. Authentic leadership draws from psychological positivism (Duignan, 2014). In other words, leaders and followers should focus on positive traits as opposed to negative traits. Authentic leadership requires and necessitates an organizational structure that is highly developed (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). An authentic leader is one who treats his followers with respect and shows reliability and consistency in thoughts, words and actions (Duignan, 2014). Furthermore, leadership under authentic principles is far different from where this research journey began. The theories are moving towards leadership being a social construct that integrates all aspects of group dynamic and the environment and other non-tangible factors (Middlehurst, 2008).

6.3 Servant leadership

Servant leadership is another approach arising from the transformative approach. The servant approach emphasizes caring of subordinates (Northouse, 2015). In this context, the leader focuses more on the needs of the follower (Northouse, 2015). The needs of the follower take priority over the needs of the organization (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Some researchers have suggested that servant leadership allows opportunities for followers to rise to the level of leaders (Malakyan, 2014). Further, if leadership is considered a function in the modern era, then the leader and follower roles should be interchangeable as the situation dictates (Malakyan, 2014).

6.4 The future of leadership principles and research

The view of the effective leader has changed markedly over time. The Great Man can no longer be found. There is no single charismatic leader using power to lead others. Leadership is a process that is a function of the individuals and the environment. With the development and growth of the study of leadership there is a group that is still historically left out of leadership research. The subordinate, also known as the follower, has not been as extensively researched as the leader (Malakyan, 2014). Furthermore, there is a new approach that examines the context of leadership according to Darwinian principles of natural selection (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). These are exciting avenues and future directions in leadership.

6.5 Follower based leadership

If we hold true that the leader and leadership are not one and the same, then one must recognize the leadership qualities of the follower. A leader is an individual while leadership is a function shared between leaders and followers who assume a measure of collective responsibility (Middlehurst, 2008). A leader exists through the existence of those that follow him or her (Malakyan, 2014). A common theme highlighted by Malakyan is that many of the leadership models the researcher's explored are viewed as static models. Regardless of whether one looks at leadership from a trait-based approach or servant approach, there exists a leader and a follower (Malakyan, 2014).

The approach coined by researchers in this area is Leader Follower Trade (LFT) (Malakyan, 2014). Under this approach, the leader and follower are no longer divided. Within the Theory X approach, the leader had the power, and the goal was to get the most out of a subordinate that was disinterested (Northouse, 2015). The leader is above the follower in a set hierarchical construct. The very structure of leadership in the United States is vertical with varying levels of management performing the functions of a leader (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). The LFT approach is an overlay to other leadership theories. The values, beliefs, ideas and influence of both leaders and followers flow freely on an equal level (Malakyan, 2014). Instead of a one-way flow of information from the leader to the follower, a two-way circular flow is created where the free exchange of ideas can take place (Malakyan, 2014). Malakyan and other proponents of LFT highlight two important limitations to success of this approach: 1) Leaders and followers may not want the free-flowing exchange of ideas and 2) The competencies required for the interchangeability of leader and follower may not exist (Malakyan, 2014).

6.6 Evolutionary approach to leadership

The evolutionary approach to leadership is novel and marries Darwinian theories with leadership principles. Under the Evolutionary Leadership Theory (ELT), leadership is an adaptive behavior that has been evolving in the human psyche (Kenney, 2012). While Darwin's work was primarily in adaptive physical characteristics, Vugt argued that our brains and very psyche fall under a Darwinian theory (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). If our bodies have adapted and are subject to natural selection, then it is logical that our brains are subject to natural selection (Kenney, 2012). Accordingly, the content within our brains such as our behavior, mentality, emotional state, reaction to stimuli have adapted through natural selection over time (Ronay & Vugt, 2014).

Vugt and his colleagues have studied peoples in southern Africa and Tanzania to gain anthropological knowledge of behaviors of our ancestors (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Within these cultures, leadership is fluid and there is no permanent or semi-permanent leader (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Leadership is fluid, exchangeable, and task oriented (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). This is like the team leadership approach, where ad hoc teams are created with differing leaders depending on the circumstances (Malakyan, 2014). Vugt suggested that under Darwinian Theory, the word leadership does not exist (Ronay & Vugt, 2014). Rather, the concept of dominance takes hold to explain how one rises to a dominant level through power, negotiation, and persuasion (Ronay & Vugt, 2014).

As discussed in the beginning, the word leadership did not enter our vocabulary until the late eighteenth century (King, 1990). Perhaps when dominance is viewed in the realm of behavior, the concept of leadership is being examined. This is a novel approach as it provides a life science explanation for certain actions undertaken by leaders.

7. Conclusion

The field of leadership study is ever evolving. The exploration of leadership has evolved from a singular leadership figure to the qualities and evolutionary principles involved in the formation of leadership. No one theory can explain every scenario or prepare every follower or leader. Each theory of leadership must be given its proper consideration. Nonetheless, each theory should be given consideration of the environment in which humankind functions. Our understanding of leadership is continually evolving.

Further exploration of the evolutionary approach to leadership should be empirically evaluated. Empirical evaluation provides the best practice in examining whether such a theory can be substantiated. Furthermore, many of the theories contain elements of other theories as they developed from them through the course of history. Perhaps a broader question is whether the different theories are merely an examination of certain aspects of leadership. The concept of leadership could be part of a larger system of thought and practice that fluidly incorporates evolutionary, transformative, servant and other aspects of leadership theories as part of a holistic concept of leadership. Though research may be directed to one particular theory of leadership, the practical aspect of leadership may incorporate all of these theories into a broader construct. The future challenge is reconciling these theories that are shown to be equally effective in analyzing leadership principles.

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